A Horse Is Not A Home

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by FascinationStreet

Summary

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"Marjorie," he smiles as he sees her, and she gets to watch him slip behind his grin like he hadn't just been shuffling around in front of the house.

She just returns his smile and waves him inside, leading him straight through to the kitchen.

"These are for you." He holds out the flowers once they're inside and he's set his bag down next to the dining table. "Just a little something to say sorry for dropping in unannounced."

Marge takes them and smells them, fresh and bright and lovely. "Bringing another man's wife flowers, what will the neighbors think?"

Notes

Wow, this one took me a while to get to this point! And it all started as a little drabble written out of spite after seeing some petty and ridiculous Marge hate in the fandom and it turned into my longest fic to date. Look, I just think Marge is great and I think her and Bucky really should be besties of all time.

Thank you so much to wonderful Tory for betaing this beast for me <3

Gale takes a little bit of a backseat in this fic - we already know a lot of what John and Gale's relationship looks like after all. This one is much more exploring how Marge and John could work together, and a lot of Marge and Gale's relationship too given that we don't see that much of them in the show and most of it is just mentions of her. He's by no means not in it, just that he's playing

more of a supporting role. But I hope that that doesn't put anyone off.

Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

The phone rings just before Marge is about to make a start on dinner. She's only just hung her coat up in the hall and she hurries into the kitchen with her bag of groceries before it rings off.

She only just makes it, breathing out a rushed greeting while she puts the bag on the kitchen counter and tries to stop the potatoes from rolling out.

"Hey Marge, hope I'm not botherin' you."

Marge pauses, expecting to hear her Momma's voice instead of John Egan on the other end. He doesn't normally call during the daytime.

"Oh, no. Of course not. But Gale isn't here John, he's still at work."

"Yeah I know, I was hoping to speak to you actually," he says after a pause.

Marge likes John. She has from the first time Gale wrote her from flight school and told her he'd caught himself a stray dog by the name of Bucky who wouldn't leave him alone until he agreed to be friends. She'd always got on with him well on her visits to the base, and made a point of bringing along friends who she hoped would catch John's eye. He was the perfect best man at the wedding, and he'd been a wonderful houseguest the one time Gale managed to persuade him to come stay for a few days.

But he's Gale's friend. And as much as she might like him, they've never made a habit of speaking much like this unless it's catching up on the niceties while they wait for Gale to come to the phone.

"Well," she says, only slightly wary, "you got me."

There's another pause and she wonders if John is hesitating or if there's just a delay in the line somewhere between them. Wisconsin is far enough away to cause a bit of trouble sometimes.

"I was uh… I was wonderin' if you would like a visitor for a few days. Had some leave come up, thought it might be nice to see my best buddy and his best gal."

Marge lets out an airy little laugh, feeling herself relax. She doesn't know why she'd been so nervous. "Of course we would! Gale will be

so pleased, he's always wondering who manages to keep you out of trouble when he's not there."

"Would you believe me if I said it was him who got *me* into trouble half the time?" John laughs. His voice sounds a little strange but Marge puts that down to the phone line. It happens a lot when they speak to John anyway.

"When are you thinking of coming?" She asks with a smile, pointedly ignoring his last comment. The silence will speak for itself.

"Well. The sooner the better, really."

It's Tuesday afternoon now, just a little after two when she looks at the clock on the wall. But neither she nor Gale have anything planned for the weekend yet, so maybe a visit from John is perfect timing. She doesn't think he would be upset for the short notice.

"That sounds good," she smiles into the phone, "I can get the guest bedroom all fixed up for you. When do you think you'll get here, Friday?"

John laughs, but it doesn't sound like he's happy. "Was thinkin' maybe a little sooner than that, even."

"Thursday?"

Another pause, another rustle down the line like he's adjusting the receiver against his ear.

"How about today?"

" *Today* ?" She almost shouts, "John you can't make it all the way here in a day, you'll make yourself sick."

"Yeah, about that. I'm uh… I'm already here, in town. Maybe an hour away."

Marge doesn't know what to say for a moment, but it doesn't take her long to recover. Gale always said John Egan was full of surprises, after all.

"Well then I guess you better get over here," she says, already planning out the things she'll have to do before he shows up.

John breathes out hard, she doesn't know if it's a sigh of relief or if he's just smoking at the same time. Maybe it's both. "I'll see you soon

then."

Marge abandons the groceries on the bench and goes to the airing cupboard for some fresh sheets. It doesn't take too long to get the room ready for him once the bed is made and turned down, it's mainly just getting out some towels to fold at the end of the bed and making sure there's no dust hanging around. She cracks the window open before she leaves the room so that it's nice and airy for him.

It's not so bad for being so sudden, but she's just glad she'd kept on top of the cleaning in there.

She's back to putting the groceries away and getting everything out to start dinner by the time there's a knock on the door. The outline of John is obvious through the lace over the door, shifting nervously on the porch and smoking. When she opens the door she's surprised by a small bunch of flowers wrapped in newspaper in his hand, his duffel at his feet.

Seeing John for the first time after a while is always surprising. She always forgets just how broad he is, and it's only more pronounced now that he's not hidden under the crisp lines of his dress uniform. The way his shoulders are tensed makes him look smaller. She doesn't understand exactly what he's nervous about, but she'd long since learned not to question a man who's been through hell and made it out the other side.

"Marjorie," he smiles as he sees her, and she gets to watch him slip behind his grin like he hadn't just been shuffling around in front of the house.

She just returns his smile and waves him inside, leading him straight through to the kitchen.

"These are for you." He holds out the flowers once they're inside and he's set his bag down next to the dining table. "Just a little something to say sorry for dropping in unannounced."

Marge takes them and smells them, fresh and bright and lovely. "Bringing another man's wife flowers, what *will* the neighbors think?"

John shuffles awkwardly as she turns to the cupboard to find a vase for them.

"Oh, I didn't mean to- it's not like that. I wouldn't do that."

“Relax John, I’m only messing with you,” she says, taking the vase and the flowers to the sink, “they’re beautiful, thank you.”

He sags a little against the counter, still standing in the entryway like he’s a vampire waiting to be invited into the room. It’s not the first time he’s been to their home, and she doesn’t remember him looking this lost. Maybe it’s just because Gale isn’t here that he’s acting odd. If this is what the two of them are like now she can’t imagine how they were together in England. No wonder the men called them the Two Buckys.

“Why don’t you sit down John and I’ll get you some coffee. You must have been driving for hours.”

He gratefully folds himself into one of the chairs at the table while Marge puts the kettle on the stovetop and sets to making it. He’s no less jittery once she puts a steaming mug in front of him followed by the vase of flowers. For some reason he can’t quite seem to meet her eye when she sits opposite him, staring just to the side of her every time he looks up.

It strikes her that just as they’ve not spent much time talking to each other on the phone, they haven’t spent any time alone like this before. The longest time they’ve ever been together without Gale was the time it took for him to go to the bar to order another round of drinks or to use the washroom, and even then there were always others at the table.

But she knows John well enough to know that his well of charm is almost endless and he’s no stranger to making conversation or filling a silence. So maybe it’s not that that has him uncomfortable.

His fingers are restless on the ceramic as he answers easy questions about work and home, giving only stunted sentences that cut off before any kind of substance. She’s seen Gale do the same when he can’t quite fathom the intricacies of polite conversation, usually in the mornings after he’s had a bad night.

John looks so lost in his own head that her heart aches for him a little.

The clock in the lounge chimes while they’re still sitting, John’s coffee mostly drank. Four o’clock, Gale will be home in just over two hours.

“Why don’t you help me with dinner, John. I could use an extra pair of hands and Gale is no good in the kitchen.”

“Well, I’m not much better really,” he rubs the back of his neck but then he stands and takes his cup to the sink and washes his hands.

Marge puts him to work washing and peeling the vegetables while she gets started on the meatloaf she was planning. There’ll be more than enough for the three of them with her Momma’s recipe, even with Gale and John’s army appetites. If they need anything else she can go into town tomorrow to stock up to see them through.

The two of them work well in the kitchen. John responds well to being directed and he loses some of the uncertainty he seemed to be carrying with every request she gives him. He chops the lettuce for the side salad too rough and too small, and he almost fumbles the eggs she asks him to crack into the bowl for her, but otherwise he does just fine.

She’s always found that when Gale is lost in his own head being given tasks seems to help, small easy things that don’t take much thought but need focus. It happens far more now after coming home from the war. It’s a good thing that John responds the same way, and he starts to give her real smiles after a while. They’re small, but they’re there.

He’s setting the table for her when she hears Gale’s car pull up outside the house. John looks up too and he smiles nervously, like he’s just remembered where he is.

“There’s some wine in the little rack under the stairs in the cellar. Can you be a dear and go grab a bottle for me? Any one will do,” she says, and he nods at her while she wipes her hands on a dish towel and goes to see her husband.

He’s looking at John’s car when she opens the door.

“We got visitors?” He asks as he leans down to kiss her, his hand warm on her waist just like always.

She takes a second to feel it, the happiness she feels at having him here, like this. Not quite happy and not quite whole, but he’s getting there. She’s so grateful that he made it back to her.

“Had an unexpected surprise today,” she pauses to wipe a smudge of lipstick away from the corner of his mouth. “Come see.”

She leads him into the house by the hand and rounds the corner into the kitchen to see John pulling the cork from the bottle of wine. Gale squeezes her hand before he lets go, a boyish grin spreading across his

face that she hasn't seen for months now. Not since the wedding. Not since the last time he saw John.

"Well I'll be damned, if it isn't the stone in my shoe."

He claps John's shoulder and John's entire demeanor changes. It's like watching him step back into himself, a well-worn pair of shoes that remember their shape even after so long unworn. His eyes turn to little half moons as he grins and spreads his arms, presenting himself to Gale like a gift.

"Thought you could use some trouble in your life, figured you might be missin' it." They shake hands and slap each other's backs in an embrace that lasts a few more beats than could be considered casual. The John that sat with his back to the wall darting his eyes nervously between the doors and windows only a few minutes ago is nowhere to be seen. It's like he was never there in the first place, but Marge remembers him.

She sits back in her chair and watches them as they talk through dinner, happy to listen and keep John's glass topped up. Wine might not be his usual drink but he enjoys it well enough.

"- so the CO told me I had all this leave saved up, time to use it or lose it. And I thought well hell, no better place to be than Casper, Wyoming." John's cheeks are rosy, his arm resting on the back of Gale's chair like it belongs there. Gale doesn't seem to notice it when he pushes away his empty plate and sits back.

"And Casper is glad to see you, Bucky. I just wish you'd told us ahead of time, I could have taken a few days myself and really shown you around."

John's smile doesn't budge but his eyes dim slightly. Marge wouldn't have noticed it if she hadn't spent all day watching him, but she's learning to read him fairly quickly. She wonders not for the first time how he hid anything.

"I really am sorry if it's an inconvenience, I could have stayed in a motel for the night if it was."

"It's not an inconvenience John," Marge smiles at him before she sets to cleaning up the dishes.

Maybe there was just no one trying to read him, she thinks. Maybe there were things they didn't want to see on a Major's face.

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In the morning after Gale has left for work she takes John into town with her. There's rain spotting the ground and heavy clouds in the sky so they take the truck just in case. No sense getting soaked for no good reason.

They go to the grocer and the butcher to get enough to last them the next few meals, then to the general for anything else. John insists on carrying the bags for her, ever the gentleman. Everywhere they go Marge sees the women she's friendly enough with to say hello to, but it's the old wives who speak to them now. She should have known they'd be flocking around like vultures desperate to be the first on fresh gossip. *Marge Cleven was seen with a strange man, I heard from a friend of a friend of a friend…*

John switches the charm on in full every time one of them stops them, kissing the backs of hands and looking like he wishes he was still wearing his Major's cap so he could tip it to them. They're just finished when they get stopped for the hundredth time in the hour they've been there.

"Well now Marjorie, this is a face I haven't seen before. Aren't you going to introduce us?" She asks without even looking at Marge, staring up at John instead and holding her hand out to him palm down.

"Major John Egan, ma'am," he takes her hand just like he has with every other woman who stopped to talk to them, "it's wonderful to meet you."

"This is Mrs Phillips, John. She's married to the headmaster up at the school."

"Edith, please." Her smile is so sharp it makes Marge hide a smile of her own behind her hand with a delicate cough.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Edith," he says as he touches his lips to her knuckles. She titters girlishly, a sound that Marge has never heard her make in all the time she's known her. Maybe John really is just that charming.

"What brings you to Casper, Major Egan?"

"Oh please, call me John," he smiles, only just letting go of her hand. "I'm just here for a visit. Gale and I served together in Europe."

“He was Gale’s best man, Mrs Phillips. I’m sure you’ve seen the photo,” Marge says and Mrs Phillips twitches a little, like she forgot Marge was there at all.

“It’s always nice to meet a war hero.”

“Oh I don’t know about that, I was just doing my part like everyone else,” John says, still smiling wide enough to distract from the way his eyes have dulled again, the way they did at dinner.

“We really have to get going Mrs Phillips, it was nice to speak to you,” Marge cuts in, only partially for John’s benefit.

“Of course, don’t mind me. You two get back to whatever it is that you were doing.”

John winks at her after they say goodbye, another strange almost-giggle following them as they continue down the street.

“They’re such gossips,” she says when they get back to the truck.

“Ah they’re harmless. Just got more time than sense, that’s all.” John loads the bags into the front of the truck then holds the door open for Marge to get in. “They just need someone to make them feel young again.”

She raises an eyebrow at him and he laughs as he shuts her door. “Not me, but someone.”

“I think I’m starting to see just why Gale always said you were trouble.”

“All lies and exaggerations,” he says with a brittle smile.

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When they get back Marge has John put the meat in the refrigerator then wash the vegetables again while she puts everything else away. She likes having him here, it’s nice to have someone else around in the house while she gets on with her jobs. She’s never minded her own company, but there’s a special kind of peace to just existing in the same space as someone – evenings spent on the couch with Gale as they both read, her and her Momma working together in the garden, an audience in a picture house sat together in the dark.

She sends him into the lounge to get the fire started once he’s

finished, the fall chill already starting to creep in under the doors and through window frames. He's almost done stacking logs in the grate when she takes him a glass of lemonade.

"You Marge are a saint among sinners."

"And don't I know it," she smiles, wiping the condensation from the glass off on the front of her apron. "Why don't you sit down for a while, enjoy your leave while you can. You don't want to be following my orders all the time."

"You'd be the best drill sergeant I ever had," he says, but he sits himself on the couch anyway.

After Gale gets home and they all have dinner they try to teach her a card game they played at the base. None of the rules make sense like they were gradually added over months or years of playing – growing wild and unruly like an untended shrub until only the people who were there as they were added can follow them – but she enjoys how patiently they try to make her understand. There's a few times she deliberately breaks one of the few rules she actually gets just to see the look on their faces.

They go for another few rounds before John proposes that they switch to poker and she agrees. He doesn't see the look that Gale gives her while he's shuffling the cards or the small smile she sends back.

John loses every single hand, and only one of them is to Gale.

"I don't know how you do it," he says as he throws down his cards and runs a hand through his hair, "I'm *good* at poker."

"My girl's a shark at cards Bucky, she'll get you when you least expect it."

"Good thing we weren't playing for money, you'd have had the clothes off my back Marge."

"Don't be silly," she smiles, "what use would I have for them? They wouldn't fit me."

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A few days later Marge is at the stove making eggs and bacon for breakfast while Gale and John read the paper at the table. Gale pulled the sports section out as soon as John sat down and handed it to him.

“So, the polka dots beat the pinstripes?” he asks as he turns a page and Marge sets a pot of coffee on the table.

John lets out a false little chuckle that makes Gale smile. “Neither. Looks like the Cubs are gonna play the Tigers for the World Series.”

“No Yankees?”

“You leave them outta this, they had a tough season.”

“Sure thing, John. Whatever you say.”

Marge plates up the food and brings it over, prompting them to put the papers down so they can all eat.

“They’re hiring again down at the refinery,” Gale says, “couple of other jobs going in town too. Looks like things are picking up finally.”

Marge *hmm* s as she swallows a mouthful of eggs. “Yeah I saw some adverts in the windows downtown.”

“Maybe I should apply.”

They both stop and look up at John, surprised.

“Maybe I could be your new neighbor, we could split the newspaper subscription.”

“Wouldn’t all the cadets miss their instructor?” Gale asks.

Marge watches them both, waiting for a tell. She knows just how much time Gale spends thinking about John, talking about him almost as much as he did in his letters home. It would be nice for him to have John closer, and she can see the way he holds himself to look casual as he continues with his breakfast. John looks just as bad, the both of them so busy trying to hide things they don’t see what’s in front of them.

“Of course we’d love you as a neighbor, John,” she says, smiling serenely, “it’d be nice to have you around more often.”

“Nah,” John shakes his head, “I’m just kidding. I’ll have to get back to Wisconsin soon. Things’ll start to fall apart without me.”

“You know you can always come here, right?” Gale holds John’s eyes seriously and John swallows hard.

“Yeah, of course I do. I’m that stone in your shoe, remember? Ain’t gonna get rid of me that easy.” John nods, to himself more than anything. “You’re stuck with me now.”

Marge reaches out to put a hand on Gale’s knee under the table. His hand covers hers and he squeezes it gently before he gets up to get ready for work.

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It’s still dark outside when Marge wakes up to an empty bed. The sheets on Gale’s side are cool, but the cover has been tucked around her to keep her warm. She wonders if he’s just gone to the bathroom but there’s no light under the door from their ensuite, and then she hears voices from down the hall.

They must be in John’s room, it’s the only way she’d be able to hear them in the bedroom.

“There’s not much for me to go back to, Buck. But it’s home. But I guess no one wanted to get to know this me either.” There’s a flatness to his voice that makes Marge’s chest feel hollow. Like he’s resigned to it, like he expected it.

“There’s plenty of people who love you Bucky.” Gale, soft yet firm. Sad.

There’s a humorless chuckle.

“I gotta go soon, Buck. Can’t stay here forever.”

“Why not?”

“You got your life now. You got Marge, that’s what you wanted to make it home for. You’re happy, you came through it. You don’t have to worry about me.”

There’s some rustling, maybe one of them sitting or standing. She wonders which one of them it is.

“Not much of a life without you in it. I didn’t keep your ass away from that fence for you to disappear on me now, huh?”

“I don’t know how to do this, Buck,” John says after a pause, his voice thin and strained. “I know this is what we fought for but I don’t know how to feel like I’m a part of it. I don’t know how to be *happy*. ”

“Then we’ll work it out. Together. Just like everything else.”

Marge shuts her eyes and tries to stop listening to give John some privacy. It’s not a conversation she was meant to hear, but she’s glad that she did if for no other reason than she needs to change John’s mind.

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In the morning she wakes before Gale and rolls over to watch him sleep for a while. It’s not often she gets to see him like this – he doesn’t sleep for long and when she wakes up during the night it’s usually because Gale is dreaming of the war. He looks peaceful now, and so much younger without the worry he carries with him when he’s awake.

She wants him to stay like this. She wants him to be free and happy, and she’s been at a loss as to how to help him do that until John arrived.

Gale loves her, she knows that. She’s never doubted it. But seeing him with John, hearing him last night, there’s a part of him that stays with John when they’re apart. There’s been something missing the whole time, some little part of himself that he’s been having to compensate for without even realizing it.

She doesn’t know John as well as Gale, but she’d bet on John feeling something similar.

Gale smiles at her when he wakes up, pushing his face into her hip as she runs her fingers through his hair.

“Morning,” he groans around a stretch.

She doesn’t know how long Gale was awake last night but he doesn’t look tired. He looks soft, sleep-mussed and warm. She just keeps working her fingers in his hair, over and over as she thinks.

“Marge? You feelin’ okay?”

“Of course,” she says, offering him a smile.

“What’s wrong?”

He pulls himself up to sit next to her and dislodges her hand in the process. It falls to his chest where he catches it, holds her palm against

his sternum over the thin fabric of his singlet. There are scars underneath it, under her hand, that she's been looking at since he came home that she still doesn't know how he got. She doesn't know if she *wants* to know, not enough to ask if Gale doesn't volunteer the information.

There are parts of him that she will never be able to understand. She wishes that she could but she doesn't think that anyone could understand them unless they were there, unless they went through the same things too.

"Marge? You're starting to scare me a little here sweetheart."

"I think you should ask John to stay," she says, looking at him properly.

"Stay? He is stayin'. He's got another few days before he has to head back."

"No, I mean he should *stay* . He shouldn't have to go back if he doesn't want to."

"Has he said something to you?" Gale frowns.

It almost sounds like he's accusing John of something, and it really would sound like that if Marge didn't know both of them better than that. But the idea of John opening up to someone who isn't him probably feels a little like a betrayal, even if it would be a good thing. It tells her all she needs to know.

"No," she says, "but maybe he will one day. I just think it would be good for you both. It would make the transition easier."

"Where's this coming from?" Gale stares at her with a furrow between his brows, confused. His hand rubs over the back of hers where it's still on his chest and she can feel the way his heartbeat has picked up. It makes her smile softly at him, bringing up her other hand to cradle his face.

"You spent so much time worrying about each other, looking out for each other. I don't think it's all that easy to stop feeling like that about someone." Marge whispers. "You're so much happier with him here."

There's a cagey look in his eye, watching her like he's waiting to be told he did something wrong. It's a look she remembers from when they were young, when he used to try and tell her Momma that the

bruises on his arms and his face were from falling down.

“I love you, Marge.” His voice is rough and she smiles at him again, pulls him in so she can kiss his mouth, his cheek, his forehead. She lets her head rest against his, her thumb running gently over his cheekbone.

“I know you do. I know you do Gale. You have such a big heart that it’s hard for you *not* to love sometimes.”

He feels suddenly fragile under her hands. He’s always been so steady and strong, such a rock for everyone since he was young. But not for himself. It’s Marge’s job to be strong for him when he can’t. She pulls him against her chest and he hides his face against her, wraps her arms around his shoulders and holds him tight until he’s done borrowing the strength he needs from her.

He clings tight to her waist like a drowning man, like she’s his mooring in a storm.

They stay like that until they hear the floorboards creak down the hall. John’s door opens and a second later the bathroom door closes.

Gale’s breathing picks up again from where it had calmed. “I have to go to work.”

She doesn’t let him pull away when he sits up. She holds his head between her hands until he looks her in the eye.

“I love you, Gale Cleven. You’re my husband and you’re a good man. I want you to be happy, happier than you have for these last few months,” she tells him, her voice firm. “I want John to be happy too, if he’ll let himself.”

Gale closes his eyes for a few seconds and wraps gentle fingers around her wrists until he can pull her hands away to kiss her palms. “I don’t deserve you.”

“Don’t be stupid, Gale. It doesn’t suit you,” she smiles.

Breakfast is quiet. John looks tired in a way that Gale didn’t, like his color has been drained from him. His smiles are flat and don’t reach his eyes but Marge thinks she’s the only one who notices. Gale is too busy getting lost in his own head, eating oatmeal mechanically and staring at the grain of the table. Neither of them are very good conversation, and as soon as she can she shoos Gale off to go get ready

for work.

She's been trying to think of a list of chores she can give John through the day, something that will keep him too busy to dwell on whatever is going on inside his head. He barely looks up when Gale leaves, and she wonders if maybe he needs some time to himself before he's ready to be a person.

"Do you think you could go chop some firewood for me, John? Noticed last night that the pile was getting low." It's what Gale usually does when he needs a moment to pull himself together but he doesn't want her to see him looking weak.

She's always been sore that she couldn't tell Gale's bastard of a father exactly what she thought of him for making him feel like that before he went and died, and she wants to do the same to whatever has John so clammed up that he can barely say two words.

There's something that he's not saying, something that's eating him every time he has to hold it back. Marge won't be the one to force it out of him, but she'll be damned if she won't give it a good go anyway.

John just grunts and carries his bowl and his mug to the sink before he shrugs into his coat and goes out the back to where the woodpile is.

She hopes that he'll let them see whatever it is when he's finally ready to let go of it. There's no doubt in her mind that he *will* eventually let it go. It's just a matter of when and how.

— — —

By the time John makes it back inside two hours later he's flushed red and his undershirt is soaked with sweat – if Marge looks out of the window she's sure she'll see a pile of firewood almost as tall as she is. She hands him a cold glass of water, ice cubes clinking together as he drains it in one go then holds the glass against his face.

"Christ, that's good," he groans.

"Go get yourself cleaned up, I've got more jobs for you to do. I'm putting you to work today, John Egan."

"Yes ma'am." He snaps a crisp salute as he hands her the empty glass. There's a smile on his face, one that tentatively shows in his eyes. It's

not the brilliant grin he usually wears but it's honest and for that Marge is glad to see it.

It looks good on him, sweet almost. It makes him look younger, and she has no trouble imagining the kinds of things he got away with as a boy just by giving his Momma a smile like that.

First she has him fixing the loose screws in some of the cupboard door hinges then sets him to getting the squeaky boards on the staircase to quiet down a bit. Once he's done that she sets him up at the kitchen table squeezing the last of the season's lemons and oranges into jugs to keep for juice and lemonade.

She manages to coax him into a steady stream of light conversation while she sets to making sandwiches for them both ready for lunch. It takes a little prodding with questions about Manitowoc and his childhood at first but eventually John takes over and dictates the flow of conversation.

He tells her about his best friends growing up and about his first kiss behind the school sheds when he was twelve.

In return Marge tells him about the first time Gale kissed her – both of them still just kids and too young to think about boyfriends and girlfriends yet. He had kissed her on the cheek for her birthday and handed her a flower that he'd picked from his neighbor's garden. She'd had to hide the flower later, pretending she hadn't seen anything when Mrs Smith played holy hell over someone getting into her daisies.

John laughs and shakes his head. “Not-So-Saint Cleven in short pants, what I wouldn't give to have seen that.”

She asks him for a story from flight school and he tells her all about the legend of One Engine Cleven and how many of the boys tried to copy his moves in the air. The spark that he's been missing all morning comes back when he talks about Gale. Marge is sure she can almost see the part of John that had been empty since everyone landed Stateside and went their separate ways, the part that has started to fill again since he's been here. Just like she can see the same thing in Gale.

“How long until you go back, John?” She asks him after they've finished eating, both of them nursing glasses of fresh lemonade.

“I'll be out of your hair soon Marge, don't worry.”

She looks squarely at him, not holding back the sad little smile she can feel in the corners of her mouth. “That's not why I'm asking.”

“Then why are you asking?”

“Because I don't think you should leave.”

John swallows hard, sucks on his teeth as he looks down at the tablecloth and the glass in front of him.

“It's okay. You and Buck got it good here, really got a chance to make a life together. Already got the house and the car, all you need’s a couple little blonde babies and it'll be perfect.” He sounds like he's thought of all of this before, like he's been turning it over in his mind again and again. “I'd just be getting in the way of that.”

It's the same thing he said to Gale last night, the same sentiment, only now she can see his expression, and now she can really hear the way his voice goes hollow when he says it. Like he's telling himself just as much as he's telling her.

“Well it seems to me like I wouldn't have a life with Gale at all if it wasn't for you, John.”

John's eyes snap up to hers, watching her carefully like a cornered dog. He doesn't say anything.

“I might not ever know what it was like over there but I know Gale, and I know enough to see that you both got each other through it.” She slowly reaches across the table, giving John enough time to stop her or move away before she places a hand on top of his. “He told me about you making sure he escaped on the march.”

“Yeah, bet he didn't tell you about the part where it nearly got him shot. Would’a been real great if I paid him back for keepin’ me alive that whole time by getting him killed. Nothing but a hindrance to him in that camp.”

“You know Gale as well as I do John, and you *know* he doesn't feel that way-” John opens his mouth to cut in but she keeps speaking and doesn't give him the chance “- you know he needs to feel useful, he needs to be needed. You both need each other.”

He won't look at her at all now, instead looking down at the carton of cigarettes that he won't light in the house held in his free hand. The packet is crumpled a little from his grip.

Marge sighs and lets go of him. She stands up to carry the empty plates over to the kitchen. He needs some space, even just a few moments where he doesn't have to school his face into an acceptable shape. She doesn't want to ruin all of the warm work she put in to make him lose the haunted look from this morning. She doesn't want to push him so hard that he snaps back just because he can.

John stands as soon as her back is turned, no doubt heading outside to smoke whatever is left in the crumpled packet.

“Just think about it, okay?”

He pauses with his hand on the door handle and nods once – more a jerk of his head than anything else – then he's gone.

— — —

Gale gets home from work just as the sun is starting to set and John still hasn’t come back. She isn’t worried about him – he’s a grown man who has been through far worse than finding his way home in the twilight. The woods behind the house aren’t that thick, the light from the windows will guide him if he needs it.

He has a lot of things on his mind, a lot of weight on his shoulders that she’s hoping he’ll be willing to put down to rest for a while, and maybe one day he’ll be willing to help them both carry it with him. If nothing else at least she knows he must be thinking about what she said, otherwise he would have come back after his smoke and pretended nothing happened.

Marge greets him in the kitchen where she’s keeping dinner warm. He kisses her cheek and wraps an arm around her waist just like always. But she can feel him looking for John. Even though he isn’t obvious about it she can feel it – a magnet reaching out for something to stick to but finding nothing.

“John’s out for a walk,” she says when he pulls away. He watches her carefully and she watches him in return, smiling softly.

“What did you say to him?” He knows her just as well as she knows him.

“I just told him that he could stay. If he wants to.”

He raises a skeptical eyebrow. “A man doesn’t take a walk in the dark just because of that.”

“I just told him the truth, that I thought it would be good for him. For both of you,” she shrugs. “And I told him that he’s the reason you came home to me alive instead of in a pine box.”

Gale closes his eyes and drops his head against hers, his nose buried in the curls at the side of her face. She presses her hands against his chest to feel each deep measured breath he takes.

“I want him to stay,” he says eventually, his voice quiet like a whisper.

“I know you do. I think he wants to stay too.”

John comes back eventually and they sit down to dinner like nothing happened – John has two fingers of whiskey, Marge has a glass of wine, and Gale tells them what he did at work. He’s been supervising the switch from the night shift and his boss is pleased. He might be up for a promotion in a week or two if things carry on smoothly.

They finish dinner and they stay at the table, some babble keeping them there that none of them seem willing to break by being the first person to leave. Conversation lulls, a quiet falling over them.

“I quit.” John doesn’t move his eyes away from the whiskey in his hand. “Put my resignation papers in a few weeks ago.”

Marge and Gale look at each other for a moment, unsure of what to say. Then Marge shakes her head slightly and sits back in her chair – this isn’t something she understands, not like Gale does. It’s not her place to try and tackle this one.

“I thought you loved it,” Gale says eventually, “Bein’ back in the air. It’s all you talked about when you got back to England.”

John smiles, nods. It doesn’t look happy.

“I did. I thought I did. But it’s not the same now. Not as fun without you up there with me, Buck,” he laughs without humor. A joke that isn’t really a joke. “I saw all these fresh faces, all these fuckin’ kids that don’t know nothing. They love it, just like we did. And they get to keep loving it, because they don’t gotta see the things we saw, don’t gotta do the things we did. I hate them for it, Gale. That they get to have that and we don’t.”

He takes a mouthful of his whiskey, still looking at the table, at his hands. Anywhere that isn’t them.

“Got my discharge through on Monday morning and I just didn’t know what to do anymore. Hadn’t really thought that far ahead. And here I am.” He shrugs like it’s nothing. Like they’re just talking about the baseball scores.

“We’re glad you’re here, Bucky,” Gale says, leaning forward to put himself in John’s line of sight. “ *I’m* glad you’re here. I’m real sorry for you that Wisconsin doesn’t feel like home, but I would be lyin’ if I said i’m not glad that there’s nothing keeping you there. Kinda got used to havin’ you around, you know?

“Like a stone in your shoe?”

“Like a stone in my goddamn shoe.”

They both huff out another humorless laugh, but Marge thinks this one is a little lighter. John manages to look at Gale, but he still won’t look at her.

“You gotta know it’s weird though, right? What kinda couple gets married then invites an old buddy to move in? People are gonna talk.”

“John, people talk all the time. I haven’t listened to them before and I sure as hell ain’t gonna listen to them now,” Marge says. She can see a crack in his shell, the same look in his eyes she’s been seeing for the last few days. Just like a dog who wants to take a treat but is too fearful of the consequences. “I don’t think anyone has a right to tell you how you can and can’t live your life after you survived a war.”

“Buck?”

“Seems to me like the lady knows what she’s talking about, Bucky,” Gale smiles.

“Yeah,” John says into the last of his whiskey, the start of a smile on his lips, “maybe she does.”

— — —

“How’d you feel about goin’ to see a game?” Gale asks over breakfast a few days later, handing the newspaper over to John when he stares at Gale with an open mouth.

“Baseball? You’d take me to see baseball?”

“Against my better judgment, yes.”

“Marge, you hearing this?”

Marge rolls her eyes at the both of them.

“Well the Tigers just won the World Series so I know you’re not gonna take me to see the big guns,” John says. Gale leans over to tap the newspaper on the page he left it open on.

“The highschool team plays all year round. They might not be the Yankees but it’s the best we got right now.”

“You don’t gotta persuade me to say anymore Buck, I already said yes.”

“Yeah well,” Gale says with a sardonic smirk, “I figure you should see what you’re getting yourself in for before you make your mind up for good.”

Marge laughs then, covering her mouth to keep it quiet. They all know the second John accepted the fact that they both want him here he would never say no. They’re stuck with him now.

She sends them off in the afternoon with a flask full of the last of the lemonade. She can’t stop herself from smiling at how excited John looks to watch a bunch of teenagers run around a field or just how much Gale is going to have to tolerate for the next few hours.

— — —

John wakes up screaming.

Marge opens her eyes just as Gale jerks himself out of bed before he’s even fully awake, reaching for the handgun in his side drawer before he realises what the sound actually is. He stands there for a moment blinking the sleep out of his eyes when John starts again, a wounded noise like an animal in pain.

She slips out of bed and wraps herself up in her robe, squeezes Gale’s arm as she goes for the door.

“Go see him, Bring him out when he’s awake and ready.”

John’s door is closed when she shuffles down the hallway but she can hear heavy breathing on the other side.

Her heart aches for him, at the deep ragged breaths that must hurt his chest. She wonders just how well he's been coping on his own, with no one to pull him out of the nightmares before they get too bad or to remind him that he survived whatever he saw in them.

She busies herself in the kitchen while Gale sees to him, pulling out cups and the tin of cocoa powder from the back of the pantry. Something warm to hold onto has always helped Gale after a bad night. She'd done it the first time he'd woken her up thrashing, leading him down here and sitting him at the table while she made it for him just like her Momma used to do for her when she had nightmares as a girl.

It's grounding, warm ceramic and sweetness to cut through the sorrow. Gale has never had a taste for tea and coffee would only make him feel worse, so cocoa just became their go-to when he needed a little help to find his way back home.

Marge heats milk slowly in a saucepan – the kettle only makes things worse on a night like this, and cocoa always tastes better with milk instead of water anyway. She could have lived the rest of her life happily not knowing that the whistle of a kettle sounds just like air rushing through bullet holes in a plane as it goes down.

Gale leads John downstairs and into the lounge just as the milk is ready. She carries his cup through the doorway and into the lounge, taking slow steady steps as she walks around the coffee table instead of going behind John so that he knows she's coming closer to him.

He doesn't look up at her as she steps closer. She can see the tension in his shoulders through the cotton of his pajama shirt.

"John?" She says softly, closer to a whisper. It takes him a few moments before he remembers how to move his hands before he can take it from her, wrapping his fingers around the ceramic of the mug.

She goes back into the kitchen for hers and Gale's, Gale giving her a strained smile when she hands it to him before she sits in the armchair opposite the couch. It's the furthest away from John that she can sit, hopefully it's enough space that he doesn't feel crowded but close enough that he doesn't feel alone either.

There's no conversation. She and Gale drink their cocoa and John continues to hold his with white knuckles like it's the only thing keeping him tethered to here and now.

Eventually after what seems like hours he takes a mouthful and lets out a sigh so heavy it has its own gravity, but the set of his shoulders loosens slightly as he takes another mouthful.

There will be more nights like this, Marge knows. Nights that aren't as easily solved with hot drinks and patience. She's ready for that – she's been dealing with this for months already. That it's John doesn't change anything for her.

"Still want me around?" John says, a cruel smile twisted on his face.

"Yes," Marge says simply.

"Of course we do, Bucky. Dreams ain't nothing compared to what we've already been through together."

John slumps back into the couch with his eyes closed, careful not to spill his drink. It's a start.

— — —

The next day John seems embarrassed. She finds him on the sofa before Gale is even awake, still in the same place he sat last night. The blanket from the back of the couch is wrapped around his shoulders and Marge isn't sure if he slept there for the rest of the night or if he went to bed after she left the two of them alone and went back to bed herself.

"I bet Buck doesn't wake you up screaming." He tries for levity but he falls flat. He sounds tired, and suddenly she wonders if he slept at all.

She watches him for a moment, weighing up a choice in her mind before she sits on the edge of the couch still giving John some space. Of all the people in the world she knows that John can be trusted with any part of Gale, even the parts of him that he hasn't actually shared with her.

"No, Gale doesn't scream," she says slowly, tentatively. "But he cries sometimes, in his sleep. That's how I know when he's dreaming."

John looks up at her in surprise, his mouth open like he wants to say something. Nothing comes out.

"Completely silent, wouldn't even believe he was crying at all if I couldn't see it right in front of me."

The two of them watch each other in the quiet of the morning, still mostly dark outside. There must be frost on the grass and the trees, but she's not interested in that right now.

"You never met his father, did you?"

She watches John's face run through several different expressions in a second and Marge knows that Gale has told him enough for him to understand what she means. The tense set of his jaw is confirmation.

"James Cleven better thank god that the drink put him in the grave before I could," she smiles tightly.

John nods and she reaches across the gulf between them to squeeze his hand before she gets up to start breakfast.

— — —

They wave John off on Monday morning, both of them standing on the porch while he reverses down the driveway and then he's off. Marge is sad to see him go, even if they both know he'll be back in a week or so once he's packed up his stuff and settled any debts. Gale squeezes her waist once he's out of sight and she can feel the way he can't quite relax fully, like John being out of sight has him in high alert.

She can understand it a little more, now that she's seen the side of John that he doesn't like to let out.

"He'll be back soon, then it'll be like he was never gone. You'll see." She bumps his hip with her own, waiting until he smiles at her.

It's a weak, stiff little smile but it's good enough for her.

"Sure thing, Marge. He'll be fine."

She waves Gale off to work and gets on with tidying up before she goes into town to stock up for the next few days. The house is quiet without John in it, even if he wasn't actually doing anything. It was nice just to know he was there, the same way she's always felt about Gale being there. It always feels more like home when there's someone else to share it with.

While she walks into town she wonders how long it'll take John to pack everything up, whether he has a lot of things to bring back with him. At the wedding she remembers him talking about being back at

home and letting his mom fuss over him for a while but from what little he'd said before he left about a landlord she thinks he must have moved out at some point.

The older women who have taken to stopping to talk to her and John whenever they were shopping don't bother her now, a few of them just smiling and waving from across the street or from the other side of the general store. She smiles back sweetly but she wishes she could turn to John or Gale to mutter under her breath about them all being old bloodhounds who are only interested in people if they think it'll make a good story later at the bridge club.

The week drags on slowly, and both her and Gale keep making mistakes without thinking. She makes too much food for dinner, Gale sets three places at the table. She pours two glasses of wine, he parks his car to leave enough space for a truck on the driveway. It feels ridiculous that barely a week of John being there has already altered a routine that they'd been making for months, since they moved into the house following the wedding. And yet both of them smile wanly at each other when it keeps happening.

Marge has just poured another surplus glass of wine back into the bottle when the doorbell chimes.

John is standing on the porch, the bed of his truck still mostly empty save for one of two boxes.

It's only Friday night, but John's shoulders and his jaw are tensed something fierce and his eyes are bloodshot like he's been driving all day.

Gale rushes out to help John carry the little he has inside and Marge goes back into the kitchen to put up a plate for him.

They don't ask him what happened and he doesn't say anything about it.

The bottle of wine Marge opened gets finished after all.

— — —

It doesn’t take long for John to unpack his things in his room, little more than the contents of a suitcase and a couple of boxes with labels scrawled on the side in John’s cramped spidery handwriting. She offers to help him do it the morning after he gets back, and spends the time re-folding his clothes into drawers and shaking out creases from

his shirts before she hangs them up in the little wardrobe. She can't see his dress uniform or anything that looks like it came from the army, not even his socks or his undershirts, but maybe he left his uniform with his Mom for safe keeping.

He seems to be in a better mood than he was when he arrived, easy conversation between the two of them while he stacks books and records on top of the dresser. He doesn't tell her what happened when he was gone and she doesn't want to pry, not when he's smiling and laughing as he tells her about Benny DeMarco's dog trying to eat his boots because he was stuck inside during a downpour.

She's sure he'll tell them when he's good and ready, and until then she's just enjoying having him back in the house to keep her company.

— — —

Gale leans down to kiss her goodnight but Marge doesn't want to let him go. He still smells musky from work at the factory and it's had her on edge since he came home.

He slowly lets his weight drop against her, settling down with an arm either side of her head. She doesn't stop kissing him, coaxing him to deepen it and press her further into the bed. It's always felt so good to have him like this, his frame blocking out the rest of the room where he cages her in and makes her feel safe.

She bends one knee up and presses it against his hip at the same time as she lets her hand travel down his torso towards the waistband of his pajamas.

"Come on Marge, not like this," he breathes against her lips, but he doesn't pull away.

"Like what?"

"Where Bucky can hear."

"Gale, he lives here now. He's going to hear some things whether you like it or not," she smiles then moves her mouth to press soft teasing kisses against his neck.

He doesn't say anything in reply, just lets out a shuddering breath that tells her to keep going. Her hand resumes its path downwards until she can cup him through the fabric. His cock is half hard already,

filling out as she rubs him. He hisses through his teeth and drops his head against her shoulder but he doesn't stop her.

Always so willing to go without himself for the benefit of others, but Marge isn't as willing to let him. She won't let him sacrifice anything anymore, not when he doesn't have to.

"From what you've told me John isn't exactly unfamiliar with what happens in a bedroom."

She feels the way his cock jumps, feels the low rumble of his groan into her neck. She just keeps stroking him, steady and sure. If he wanted to stop she would let it go, never mention it again. But she doesn't think he wants her to.

He would never say anything himself, but she knows him better than almost anyone else. And this is one of the things she won't let him sacrifice when there's no reason for it.

She pushes at him with her knee until he drops back onto the bed beside her. There's a moment where he looks like a rabbit in the headlights – where maybe he thinks that she's upset with him – until she fits herself against his side and kisses him again. She means it to be just as gentle as the hand still working him to full hardness but he deepens it immediately, pulling her so that she's almost on top of him.

"Christ, Marge," he pants when they break apart for air. He sounds like they've been going at it for hours.

She needs to feel him properly. She needs to feel how good this is for him, needs to feel how much he likes this.

"Let me," she says as she straddles his hips, hands against the broad span of his chest as she finds her balance.

Gale breathes harder as he reaches down to push his pants out of the way, his other hand holding onto her bare thigh as she guides him into her.

" *Fuck* ," he breathes out when she fully seated, his voice strained and shaking.

For a moment she wonders if he's already close just from this. Just from thinking about John while he's in bed with her. Talking about his best friend while he's inside of his wife.

Maybe it should upset her. Maybe anyone else would be hurt by it, but not her. Maybe it shouldn't make her core throb when she imagines John hearing them through the wall, or when she thinks about him taking himself in hand while he listens. But Marge doesn't care about what she should or shouldn't feel. All she wants is to be happy, to make Gale happy.

She leans down to take hold of his face, holding him still while she kisses him. Then she rolls her hips and swallows the strangled noise Gale lets out into her mouth.

"Maybe he wants to hear," she whispers. The space between them feels private, far away from everything else. No expectations or judgements. Just the two of them and this *thing* that has been hidden for far too long already. "Maybe he's even listening."

"Oh god, fuck Marge, *god* ." He sounds wounded, each word punched out of him as he comes inside her and holds her tight against him.

She wants to come like this, with his come held inside her by his cock, not yet soft. It won't take long, she's been close since he let her see the truth of him. She reaches down between them to rub at herself until the fire in her belly crests over and she tightens around him, her nerves singing with the force of it.

" *Gale* ," she moans, and he lets out a pained groan as she works his cock with the contractions, like it hurts just as much as it feels good. He must be sensitive so soon after coming himself.

They hold still as they come down, heads pressed together sharing breaths. Gale's eyes are still closed, just like they have been since she started talking.

"Look at me, Gale. Please."

It takes him a moment but he opens them eventually and looks up at her. He's never looked this fragile before. She's seen him shaken, she's seen him swallowing down pain and fear with a straight face, she's seen him mourn a father who never deserved a son as good and brave as him.

She's never seen him look at her like a dog hoping for a gentle hand but resigned to a fist, and she never wants him to look like that ever again.

"You need to tell him, sweetheart. I know you can do it," She

whispers, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to his forehead. “You deserve this, you’re allowed to be happy. I know you’ve got enough room in that beautiful heart of yours for the both of us.”

She strokes her thumbs over his cheekbones and lets him pull her in for a kiss, so achingly soft and sweet. His hands shake on her waist and in her hair but there’s so much strength in him that she’s not worried. She knows he'll be fine, even though it's going to be hard for him.

John himself is another matter entirely, but Marge isn't too worried about him either. It'll be harder for John to let himself believe he can have what he wants, and she knows it'll take time.

It's a good thing that being this side of the war means that they have all the time he needs.

— — —

“Now are you gonna tell me I had to find out from old Mrs Sanderson that you’ve had a house guest?”

Marge smiles apologetically as her Momma turns to drop a handful of freshly pulled onions in the basket she’s holding.

She’s been here all day – she left in the morning just after breakfast. Her Momma needs help pulling all the fall crops from the garden she’d said, and Pa’s no help since his back has gone. John smiled at her easily over the morning paper then told her to have a nice day and say hi for him. Gale had just given her a shaky if determined smile as she bent down to press a kiss into his hair on her way out. She’d given his shoulder an extra squeeze before she pulled away.

The boys need some time alone, and she’s so proud of Gale she could burst with it.

“Sorry Momma. It was a bit of a surprise for us too.”

“Well, who is he then?”

“As if you don’t already know,” she laughs. “Mrs Phillips even *talked* to him, I bet she was the envy of the bridge club gossip circle that day.”

Her Momma drops another handful of onions into the basket then hands out a trowel and a pair of gloves for her to start turning over

the soil. She kneels down on the foam pad she found in the shed and gets started.

“Is he a good friend to Gale?”

“He’s the one Gale wrote about in all of his letters.”

They work in a comfortable silence for a while, the sound of the trowel in the earth and soil being shaken out of roots blending with the birds. It’s nice, peaceful in a way that reminds her of her childhood where things were so much more simple.

“That boy could use some good friends, after all he’s been through,” her Momma says eventually once she’s moved down the patch onto the carrots. Marge couldn’t agree more.

“They look out for each other.”

“I never met any of the boys your father fought with during the Great War,” she says sadly. She pulls her gloves off to adjust the scarf that’s gradually failing in holding her hair out of her face while she works. “He’s never said a word about them, not as long as I’ve known him.”

Her Pa doesn’t like to talk about any of it. Granny once told her that when he came home from the war she put down newspaper on the floor so he could strip off his uniform and then he burned it out in the yard and never spoke of it again. The few times she asked him about it before she was too old to know any better he didn’t say a thing, just walked out of the room with his hands shaking.

“Now you look after those boys, Marjorie. You know men don’t know no good sense. You keep them right.”

“I will Momma,” Marge smiles, and she means it.

“And bring them both over for dinner some time! It’s been too long since we saw our son in law, and I want to meet the famous friend from all those letters.”

— — —

It’s almost dark by the time she gets home, and she hopes it’s been enough time for them to talk about everything they need to get out between them if nothing else. She tried to avoid thinking about them for most of the day – it would be pointless worrying about them when there isn’t really anything to worry *about* , only that the two of them

aren't natural talkers when it comes to feelings. But she'd done all she could for them and left them to it, and there was nothing left for her to do but give them the space to do something about it.

Maybe she's more nervous *for* them than anything else. She's not worried about things changing, because that's what she wants. Things would be so much better for all of them if they do this, her and John sharing Gale. They just have to get out of their own way for long enough to let it happen.

Her Pa drives her home, and she sits for a moment after the car stops. She doesn't want to rush in and interrupt anything, and she just hopes they heard the truck pull up outside.

"Don't forget Marjorie," he says while she gathers up the bag full of vegetables from the garden and the tray of casserole she helped make after they were done pulling them, "your mother wants you and the boys over for dinner soon. You know what she gets like if we don't see you often enough."

"I promise we'll be there soon," she kisses his cheek and climbs out of the cab, juggling everything in her hands so she can wave him off before she goes inside.

She opens the front door and carries everything into the kitchen, then goes in search of the two of them. She finds them in the lounge, John pressing Gale against the sideboard. His hands are on Gale's waist, and Gale's hands are in John's hair and on his neck. They're not kissing, but their lips are rosy and kiss-bitten so she has no doubts what they've been up to.

The way her core tightens at the sight of them isn't unexpected, but it still makes something in her chest flutter alongside the heat to actually see it.

Things are going to be okay. She can feel it, something right finally clicking into place.

Neither of them have noticed her so she guesses they were too busy to hear the truck outside. It gives her a chance to look at them properly, to really take in the image before they move away. Their foreheads are together, just happy to exist in each other's orbit. John's hands look huge on Gale's hips and watching them squeeze gently doesn't do anything to make Marge less aroused. Gale has a smile that could rival the sun. It's soft and small but so happy, unguarded in a way he rarely lets himself look.

She leans against the doorway, tilting her head until it touches the wood, just watching them breathe each other in for a moment longer.

They both look like they've been shaken apart and been put back together stronger, like they've rearranged parts of themselves to cover the void that their separation has left behind. They can both finally put those pieces back where they belong.

"Looks like things went well," she says eventually, smiling as the two of them jerk in surprise.

But John rips himself away from Gale like he's just been caught at the scene of a crime, eyes wide and panicked. Poor Gale blinks dazedly from where he's been left against the sideboard while John practically flies across the room away from him.

"Marge I uh- I didn't- I don't- oh *hell,* " John stammers, fingers pulling at his hair and making it even wilder after Gale's fingers fell away.

She wants to laugh at him for being so ridiculous but she bites it back. It's easy for her to come back to this – she wanted this to happen, she told Gale to do it, she knew what to expect. But it can't be as easy for him.

So instead she pushes herself up and goes over to Gale, kissing him on the cheek in greeting the same way she always does. Then she walks over to John and does the same for him, holding onto his arm as she has to go up on her tiptoes to reach his cheek.

"Boys," she smiles, "I hope you had a good day. Come help me get dinner started? Momma made her casserole."

John gapes at her as she goes, and this time she can't help but laugh at him just a little. It's the first time she thinks she's ever seen him lost for words. She lets them have a few minutes to recover while she turns the oven on to heat up and starts unpacking the spoils of her labor in the garden. She can hear them moving around and John's heavy breathing but no talking, though she supposes they don't always need words to have a conversation.

They come in eventually and she sets them to work setting the table and pouring drinks. Hopefully acting as if everything is normal will put John at ease once he's calmed down. If she doesn't make a big deal out of it then neither will he. In theory, anyway.

Dinner is quiet. Gale asks about her parents and she tells them both

about the garden and her brother dropping by with her nephew for lunch. John looks between the two of them the whole time like he's waiting for the other shoe to drop. Marge wishes she could soothe him like she's seen Gale do with spooked horses in the fields when they were younger.

She wants to give him space to process but at the same time she doesn't want to give him too much time alone for him to talk himself out of anything – her biggest worry is him convincing himself he needs to be a martyr to his own feelings.

When they're done eating she sends John into the lounge to light the fire. It's become one of his jobs ever since he started chopping the firewood, and he's become oddly proud of how good he is at the whole process. She keeps Gale back in the kitchen to help with dessert, though she doesn't need much help to put out three bowls of ice cream.

"How did it go?" She asks as soon as John is out of earshot and busy with building the logstack in the grate.

Gale wraps his arms around her waist from behind and rests his head on her shoulder as he lets out a long shuddering breath. "He feels the same, but I think he's convinced he can't have what he wants. I don't think he believes it's real, and I don't know what to say to convince him."

Marge just continues with dessert, letting Gale breathe until he finds the words he needs.

"I can't make him do something he thinks he shouldn't, even if he wants it. He's as stubborn as an old mule sometimes."

"Since when has John Egan ever let anything stop him?" she says with a smile, and she feels Gale's lips moving against her neck to match it.

"Well, maybe you can talk some sense into him. Maybe he'll believe it from you."

Her hands still for a moment, still holding the tub of ice cream. All of John's apologies for taking up space before they convinced him to stay come back to her, all of the times he apologized just for existing in their lives as if he wasn't already a part of it whether he liked it or not. Almost like he doesn't think he's allowed his chance at peace when others never got theirs.

“Maybe I will,” she says, shrugging Gale off her so she can put the tub away in the freezer.

They spend the evening in front of the fire in the lounge, listening to records and chatting about everything and nothing. Gale has to really work to get John to join in, coaxing him with no doubt purposely butchered stories of the things they all got up to on the base in the better times until John can’t hold his tongue and has to jump in to correct something.

Marge purposely chooses to sit on the couch next to John while Gale takes the chair so he can be in charge of changing the records when they end. She lets her knee rest against his when she tucks her feet up under herself and she smiles at him when she hands him another glass of whiskey.

He’s not his usual self, but it’s far better than him being alone with his thoughts all night. He doesn’t leave until both she and Gale get up to turn in for the night, and that alone gives her hope that maybe the answer to all of this really is as simple as she thinks it is.

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John has taken to going out on walks after lunch, the same way he did the first time Marge tried to push things with him.

He has to come back sooner now with the nights rapidly getting colder and longer. It's not hard to tell that he's avoiding her. She's started to run out of jobs around the house to keep him busy and she's wary of forcing the issue too much and making things worse. So she just lets him avoid her.

She doesn't know John as well as Gale does. She might be able to read him better now but she still doesn't know where his limits are, she doesn't know when to keep pushing him or when to take a step back and let him figure things out for himself.

Last time she pushed the matter and it worked out well, but it could have just as easily gone the other way and made things worse. She got lucky that time, and she's not quite ready to take the risk a second time without knowing there's a chance of success.

This isn't something Marge wants to mess up, for either of them. Not so soon after they got him here.

She remembers the way John looked when he felt cornered. She can't

make him look like that again before she's even given him the chance to broach the subject of whatever is eating him for himself.

There's not a lot she wouldn't do for Gale, and the same could be said for John. But she can't fight this war for them, as much as she wants to.

Sometimes the best course of action is nothing.

John spends more time in his bedroom now, keeping out of the way like a half-feral cat, but he won't let her walk into town on her own when he can drive her. She's more than happy to go alone – after all, she's been doing it herself for years – but she's grown used to having him with her too. She only protests his offer the first time, and when he insists, she just lets him. She does him the courtesy of hiding the fond smile it puts on her face, this protective streak that he's trying to hide as though it's not obvious. It's not as clear whether he's doing it for Gale's benefit or just for her, but it doesn't really matter why in the end. It's still sweet of him.

He's not as chatty as he used to be but it's still nice to have his company, and he still charms all the old women who have come to look for his presence whenever they see Marge.

He doesn't follow her around the stores anymore. He buys anything he needs from the general store – the usual smokes or razor blades – then he disappears. The first few times he did she found him waiting for her in the truck, but the weather turns cold fast and it seems to set him on edge. Neither he nor Gale are all that good with the cold anymore.

There's a diner a little down the street from where he parks the truck and that's where she finds him now, nursing a cup of coffee wedged into a booth with his back to the wall. Every time she comes to find him she half expects him to be in the bar next door, but he's always there, in the same booth watching everyone through the window as they pass.

She usually sits herself on the opposite side and waits for him to finish, talking about who she saw and who asked about him when he wasn't with her. There's not an older woman in the town who hasn't been thoroughly hit by the John Egan charm.

Sometimes he laughs at her commentary, sometimes he just smiles. Sometimes he doesn't react at all, but she doesn't mind.

“It's okay, you know John,” she'd said the first time she found him in here. “I just need you to know that. It's all okay.”

The way he'd sucked at his teeth and wouldn't meet her eyes told her that he understood what she was talking about. He'd nodded eventually, then drained the rest of his coffee in a few mouthfuls so they could go home again.

He still won't let her carry any of the bags back to the truck, and she only lets herself smile at him when he's walking in front of her with both hands full.

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There had been hope that with enough time to process, John would come around sooner rather than later. She doesn’t ask for details and she makes sure she gives John and Gale time alone so that they can figure things out and spend time together, just the two of them.

At first she thought they had – she was always hearing them talking, too low to make out any actual words but enough to make out both of their voices. She’d just assumed things were going well and that John was avoiding her out of some misplaced awkwardness about sharing her husband that she was content to ignore and let him figure out in his own time.

But Gale doesn’t look any happier. If anything he just looks sad, and there are more than a few times she catches him staring at John over the table while John is deliberately avoiding both of them.

“How are things with you two?” she asks one night, both of them in bed about to settle down for the night. She’s waited as long as she can stand for Gale to say something, and the part of her that feels the need to fix things has won over her ability to wait them both out.

Gale just sighs from the bottom of his soul and rests his head on her chest, her hand automatically going to his hair to run her fingers through it.

“He said he wanted this when we talked but he won’t even sit next to me when we’re alone, won’t even look at me some days. Always says *we shouldn’t* or *we can’t* .” He sighs again, wrapping his arms around Marge’s waist as if he’s afraid she’s going to do the same. “He’s the most stubborn, infuriating son of a bitch I’ve ever known.”

“That can’t be a surprise to you,” she tries for humor and gets a half-

hearted smile in return.

“What if he’s changed his mind, Marge?”

She shakes her head immediately – she knows it’s not true just the same way she knows water is wet and the sky is blue. John wouldn’t be acting like this if he had, he wouldn’t be acting like a dog stuck out in the barn when it wants to be inside the house.

“It’s a lot to process, Gale. I’m still trying to get my head around it sometimes, and it must be harder for him. None of us know how this is supposed to work.”

He just *hmm* s and buries his nose in her nightdress, and she keeps running her fingers through his hair as he slowly falls asleep.

It might just be time for her to have a proper talk with John, whether he’s ready for it or not. There’s only so long she can stand to watch them both make themselves and each other miserable for no good reason.

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Marge waits until John is putting his boots on at the back door before she walks into the kitchen, her own winter boots that she’d dug out from the back of the closet and her coat in her hands. It’s a little underhanded, but if John didn’t want her to take advantage of his routine then maybe he shouldn’t be quite so predictable – his routine hasn’t changed since she found him and Gale in an embrace, always taking his afternoon walk, even in the rain.

“I thought I’d join you today,” she smiles, not giving him much of a choice in the matter. “I’ll be good to make the most of the cooler weather before the snows roll in.”

She watches him cycle through responses in his head, no doubt trying to find some kind of way to get out of it when his hand is already on the door and he’s about to leave. None of them are worth uttering, it seems, and by the time Marge is pulling her coat on he seems like he’s accepted that there’s no way out of it.

She has no doubt that he could get out of it if he was so inclined, she’s not quite as crafty as the Luftwaffe after all, but he accepts his fate graciously. It’s for his own good anyway. Not that he knows it yet, but he will soon.

They walk in silence for a while, Marge's hand hooked around John's elbow while he slows down to match her deliberately sedate pace. She's not interested in walking like there's something following her.

"What are we doing here, Marge?" John asks eventually. They've made it all the way into the woods and onto the dirt track that runs parallel to the street without saying a word.

"I thought we were having a nice walk. Why, what do you think is happening?"

"You know what I mean. What's happening with all of this…" He makes a hand gesture that she assumes is meant to encompass everything.

They continue walking, Marge keeping her pace steady even when she can feel John starting to get antsy, a dog that wants to slip the leash and run.

"It seems to me like we're all just trying to make a life in any way we can," she says when John's fists start clenching in his pockets.

"What you saw. Me and Gale. It wasn't… It won't happen again. You can trust on that."

"Hmm. Why not?"

That stops John in his tracks. She lets him drop her hand, and faces him in the middle of the road, waiting for him to work through whatever it is that's going on in his head.

"Gale's not- he doesn't know what…" He trails off, shaking his head. Then he pulls out his carton of cigarettes and lights one to give himself time to think. "I won't let him do that to you Marge, or himself. He thinks he needs this but he doesn't. You're good together, you're *happy* . That's all that matters."

"And are you?" She asks.

"Am I what?"

"Are you happy?"

John draws hard on his cigarette, smoke pouring through his nostrils as he sighs unhappily.

"I'm here. And that's a hell of a lot better than I was." Another pause,

another cloud of smoke exhaled while he moves his mouth around the shape of the words he won't let himself say. "It's enough. I don't need any more than that, you've both done enough for me."

Marge smiles softly at him, so incredibly fond of him in this moment and so many others. For someone as smart as he is he just can't seem to grasp how simple this all is.

"John, do you really think Gale would step out on me, go behind my back?"

"No," he says immediately. A fundamental truth that he knows to be true, something he clearly doesn't even have to think about. "He loves you. He made it home for you."

"He made it home for both of us, John."

He stares at her, and it makes something in her chest clench at just how similar the look in his eyes is to Gale. Hunted, cornered, but so desperate at the same time. So full of hope and defeat all wrapped up together.

"Gale loves you John. You know that, and I know you love him too. It doesn't have to be shameful, and it doesn't have to be any more complicated than that. What kind of wife would be if I didn't want him to be happy? We can make him happy together – why wouldn't I want that for him?"

When he still doesn't say anything she reaches out to take his hand, smiling again when he lets her take it without stepping back. It dwarfs hers, these hands that have flown planes and dropped bombs and killed men, but he still feels like a little boy who just needs to be told that he's allowed to have what he wants. He's allowed to be happy.

"It's okay John. It's *okay* , that's what I was trying to tell you. If you want this then you can have it. You're hurting him and you're hurting yourself by thinking otherwise."

She tugs John until he starts walking again, letting his hand hang between them. He doesn't let go of her, so she squeezes it gently. He squeezes back and stays like that, holding too tightly but not enough to hurt her. Like he needs the anchor until he finds his footing, and she's glad to keep him steady until he does.

"I don't understand how this can work. How can we do this?" He asks when they've turned around and started the walk back to the house.

His voice is quiet, almost a whisper. The sky is growing dark but there's still enough light to see the way when they get into the forest.

"I don't know how it'll work either," she says, turning to look at him, "but I think we ought to try. We can all work it out together."

John just nods and lets her walk them back to the house before Gale gets home.

They start to make dinner together when they get in, and it feels so much like that first night when John just got here, that Marge can't stop herself from smiling as they move around each other in the kitchen. Her smile gets bigger each time John looks at her like she's gone a bit strange and started speaking in tongues or something, as if he doesn't understand *why* she could feel so happy in a moment like this.

He'll get it eventually though. The world might not have changed in any significant way, and no one outside of this house will ever know about it, but that doesn't matter to her. All that matters is that the three of them are here together and they're going to make things work.

The tasks Marge gives John this time around are a bit more involved than they were the first time – he's been picking up a lot of things while they've been here together, keeping house and each other company, waiting for Gale to get off work and come back to them. She gets him to make the meatballs for spaghetti while she makes the sauce, the two of them side by side in front of the stove, handing each other salt and pepper.

In a way it's to keep John present and focussed, but it's just part of the ongoing effort to show John that his presence isn't merely *tolerated* . They've wanted him here the whole time, and eventually he'll understand that too.

She doesn't know how things will shake out in the end, but she's certain now that John has no misconceptions about whether or not he's allowed to want Gale. And now, if nothing else, Marge knows to be direct with John so he can't get in his own way. It's a lesson learned that she won't forget.

For now she's content that she's done what she can to make things easy for them. What happens later down the line isn't something any of them need to think about right now – they've only just taken the first real step in whatever this thing between them is. There are so

many things they don't know yet, and so much time to figure it out.

There's time for her to see John and Gale together, to see some of the easy comradeship from the war that spilled over into love. There's time for her to see Gale truly happy, without hiding a part of himself that he didn't know how to acknowledge. And there's time for her and John to get to know each other properly, to see where that leads.

Because there's a part of her, she's realizing, that wants John a little too. She wants part of the easy physicality John and Gale have with each other, and she wants to know what it feels like to have the full force of John Egan focussed on her, even just to know what Gale has felt for all these years with him.

She wants him for Gale, to make him happy and whole, but she wants him for herself too. Just a little.

Chapter 2

Winter hits both Gale and John hard. The ease of their smiles after the dust settled between the three of them disappears, a hard-edged cold creeping into both of them that they try to keep at bay. Their efforts aren't very successful, but Marge doesn't comment on it. She doesn't need to point out the obvious, and if it helps them to try and carry on as if things are normal, then she can give them that.

More nights than not she wakes up to an empty bed and noises from down the hall, awful wretched noises that make her heart ache. Gale still takes the time to tuck the covers around her before he leaves so that she doesn't get cold, and it always brings a sad smile to her face. Still caring for everyone else when he's seeing barbed wire and guard towers behind his eyes.

Some nights, when she hears the crying and the high, choked-off words that run into each other, she leaves to each other. She knows they spent most of their nights in the camp in the same bunk, sharing warmth and comfort in equal measure that she could never rival – they need each other more than they need her on those nights, the simple reminder that they're still alive, they made it out, and that they still have each other. They know best what the other needs when they're both taken back to that horrid place or to a burning plane in the sky.

Some nights, when she can see the flow of the fire down the hall, she wraps herself up warm in her dressing gown and goes down to see them. The warm cocoa and soft blankets she's taken to keeping in a basket in the lounge for nights like this do something to ease the far away emptiness in their eyes, and she does what she can to remind them that they're not alone.

She doesn't know how much it helps in the grand scheme of things. She can keep the curtains closed when snow is piling up in the fields behind the house and on the window ledges, she can put records on low to fill the aching silence when neither of them can find words to break it, she can hold their hands and share her warmth with them until they stop feeling the phantom bite of ice cold winds. It doesn't stop the nightmares coming another night, and it doesn't make them any easier to bear, but all she knows is that she would do anything to try and heal the scars they carry.

"It won't always be like this," John says one night before they go back

to bed, the clock showing four in the morning and both of them so tired they can't seem to stand up straight. It sounds more like he's trying to convince himself of it than anything else, but Marge smiles and rubs his arm through his house jacket like she can rub some warmth back into him.

"The first winter after a bad harvest will always be the hardest," Gale mumbles, voice rough and gravelly with lack of use.

John heads upstairs first, and Marge hangs back to turn off the record player while Gale banks the fire. He waits for her by the foot of the stairs when he's done, leaning against the bannister the way he usually does but without any of the casual confidence he usually has in the day. All that's left of him tonight are bones and skin, a weariness so deep he must feel it in his guts.

"Go, Gale. I can sleep alone for one night, you need each other more," she says when she draws level with him. He's slumped enough for her to kiss each of his paper-thin eyelids without having to push up onto her toes.

He goes without a protest, squeezing her waist as he pulls away. Neither of them mention that it's more than just one night, and there will be many more nights like this in the near future before things get better. She doesn't need to point out the obvious.

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Sometimes when a noise wakes Marge during the night to an empty bed it's not bad dreams that are the cause.

Sometimes instead of pained cries there are bitten-off moans and panting breaths, the slow slick slide of skin instead of pacing.

Sometimes Marge will fall asleep once her brain realises there's no danger and no need for her to make cocoa or fetch blankets, and sometimes she will stay awake to listen.

There's a part of her that respects that Gale and John need time alone together, just to exist or to be with each other, just as she and Gale have their own time without John whether it be just to talk or to be together as man and wife.

Gale and John aren't man and wife, but they lie together all the same, and she can't deny herself the urge to listen to the groans and murmured sounds of affection and love and wonder what it would be

like to watch them properly, to see what it is they do together.

She doesn't know how two men are intimate, whether Gale does the same things to John as he does to her, or perhaps John is the one doing it to Gale. It's not clear from the sounds alone, but the more nights she listens the more her mind tries to fit images to the noises, picturing where hands would go, where the kisses are placed, what their mouths are doing and where.

Sometimes when she imagines it she allows her thighs to spread under the sheets, a heat growing between them that she tried to ignore at first but gives in to with less resistance every time.

And sometimes when she imagines them as she brings herself to orgasm, she finds herself imagining what it would be like to be caught between both of them, all moving together with shared breaths and sweat-slick skin.

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John found a job a few weeks after he'd settled into the house. It's only a few hours a day at the general store hauling boxes and stacking shelves, but it's better than nothing. Marge hadn't even known there was a job going there until the first time she'd seen him at work and it was clear that he'd charmed the owner and his wife enough for them to make the offer.

Their son never made it home from the war, lost on one of the islands in the Pacific. It's good for both of them, she thinks. John gets to keep himself busy and feel like he's not freeloading – no matter how many times both she and Gale tell him he doesn't need to pay for anything – and they're doing better having someone to help out and do odd jobs that the teens who work there at the weekend aren't interested in doing.

It's good for John to get out of the house too, good for him to have something to take his mind off the cold and the snow and being stuck in one place for too long. Not that there's anything stopping him from doing anything he wants to, but she's found him more than once standing still in the middle of a room like he doesn't know what to do with himself. He's always seemed to thrive around people too, even if she can see how brittle his mask is some days.

She's glad he's found something to keep him occupied and to make him settle back into what passes as normal life these days, but she'd be lying if she said she doesn't miss having him around the house as

much.

He comes home before Gale, usually just after the lunch rush at the store finishes. He kisses her on the cheek and presents whatever it is that he's brought home that day, whether it be a new book, a record, or just the groceries on the list she gave him that morning.

He's finally stopped skulking around the house anymore like he thinks she's going to get sick of him and send him back to Wisconsin – his shoes are sitting crooked in the hallway next to Gale's house slippers, his books are mixed in with theirs on the shelves and there's always one or two dog-eared dime novels on the coffee table. He hogs the bathroom in the morning, and sometimes she finds him and Gale side by side at the sink shaving or brushing their teeth. It always makes her smile when she sees it, and it's so easy to imagine them in their army uniforms, stripped down to their undershirts in the barracks.

Once he's home they usually make dinner together, John's insistence that she teach him how to cook once he mastered chopping, peeling, and prepping finally starting to pay off. There are a few things that he can make from scratch now as Marge takes him through all of the recipes her momma first taught her when she was old enough to be trusted with knives and heat. Sometimes after a good day at work John will make her sit at the table to keep him company while he does it all himself – spaghetti or breakfast for dinner – while she puts her feet up. She's not sure why she's the one in need of a break when he's been at work but she can't find it in her to argue with John's happy grin, like a little boy trying to make breakfast in bed for Mother's Day.

His hand is always warm and large on her waist or her back as they move around each other in the kitchen. Sometimes they'll listen to the radio and sometimes they talk, sometimes they just exist in a comfortable silence that has grown between them, and every time it happens she finds herself surprised all over again that John is even capable of that kind of quiet.

Gale has found them like that more than once, in silence or John making her laugh while he twirls her around to the jaunty tune on the radio. He only dropped her hand like it burned him the first time, somehow unsure if he'd done something wrong even though none of this is normal for anyone else.

"Did he ever tell you about the time he danced, back in England?" He asked the next time Gale came home to a dance hall instead of a

kitchen, keeping his hand on her waist instead of snatching them back.

“Gale? *My* Gale, dancing?”

“He danced with a dog, Marge. Everyone thought he’d finally lost it, spinnin’ round the hall with a dog half as big as he was, and the dog was still a better dancer than him.”

Marge had laughed while John dipped her and Gale just shook his head with a private little smile on his face as he moved around them to rescue dinner from the oven. It had only been a little dark around the edges, which was entirely worth it for the wide grin on John’s face as he continued to lead her around the floor.

“Dunno how he had such a beautiful woman waiting for him at home and still danced with a dog. The mysteries of life, huh?”

“Well, John,” she’d said, feeling a little brave and a little stupid, “guess you’ll just have to dance with me instead.”

She remembers looking up at him, her hands still on his shoulders after another dip and his hands on her waist. They were so big they almost met at the small of her back, and even now when she thinks about it she can feel an echo of the heat that burned inside her at the feeling of being held like that.

“Better keep the woman happy, John,” Gale said from behind them with an oven glove on one hand.

“Yes, Major.”

There might have been an echo of the heat Marge felt in her belly in John’s eyes, or maybe she added it to the memory afterwards. She doesn’t know, but she definitely remembers the knowing look in Gale’s eyes as John let go of her to take over from him at the oven.

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When Marge asks John if he has any plans to visit home over Thanksgiving she’s met with complete silence. They’re in the lounge with the fire crackling, and Marge is making an attempt to fold napkins into little turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner in a few days while John makes an equally ambitious attempt to repair one of his books that looks like it’s seen better days. The edges are worn soft and the print on the cover is faded but she thinks it might be Guys & Dolls

judging by the artwork. There are pages that are loose, some that are ripped and already patched with tape. She'd ask him why he didn't just throw it away if it wasn't clear from past repairs that there's a reason to hold onto it, even if she doesn't know what it is.

His hands freeze where they're in the middle of laying a strip of tape down the seam, looking like when the projector at the picture hall stutters and the picture hangs for a second too long. It only lasts for a moment, until he swallows heavily and goes back to his repair job with an air of forced nonchalance.

"Haven't really thought of it," he says with a voice that would sound steady were she not already listening for the way he forces it to be so, "I don't have any plans yet."

Marge does him the courtesy of not looking at him, instead focussing on trying to make her paper turkey stand up on its own.

"There's plenty of time yet, no need to rush," she says neutrally, before she drops it all together. "Do you think we should make our own cranberry sauce for dinner or should we play it safe?"

It takes him a moment to answer, and he clears his throat before he says anything.

"Between the two of us I'm sure we can manage. Besides, even if it goes wrong you know Gale will say it was great anyway."

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Considering the fact that it's the first time Marge will ever host a Thanksgiving on her own she feels surprisingly calm about it. Until she wakes up on Wednesday morning and it hits her that she's *never done this on her own* and there's so much to do and she doesn't know how she's going to get it all done or if it'll turn out any good.

John is at the store all morning and Gale left for work early, something about being the only supervisor who didn't take the day off. So it's just her and the mountain of food that needs to be made and cleaning to be done and lord knows what else. As soon as he gets back he washes up then gets started on peeling and chopping everything without her even having to ask.

When Gale comes home again she's in the lounge flipping through the cookbooks that have been a permanent feature on the coffee table for the last two weeks. She's lost the recipe card she made for the cobbler

she wanted to make for dessert and she can't remember which book she found it in.

"Hey," he says as he pulls her hands away from tearing through the pages, "everything is going to be fine, Marge. You're a whizz in the kitchen and you have John as your sous chef. You focus on the food and let me take care of everything else, okay?"

He kisses her brow and she lets herself slump against him tiredly for a moment, breathing in the smell of cigarette smoke and oil from the factory clinging to his shirt. It's not exactly a nice smile, but she still associates it with good things.

"I'll be back after a shower to help out. Don't run John into the ground before I get back, okay?"

She shoves him away towards the stairs with a smile. "It'd take more than just little old me to run John Egan ragged."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that!"

The next time she sees Gale she's already in full swing, ordering John around in the kitchen while she makes sure everything on her list is going to plan. There's still so much to do, enough that it barely seems like they've made any progress at all despite the refrigerator being full of things that just need to go in the oven tomorrow.

"Christ Marge, not even the army kitchens were this well disciplined."

"Yeah, you're telling me," John says, "they should have made Marge the Air Exec, not me."

"Gale honey, if you're not going to help then I don't need you in the kitchen," she sing-songs. "But if you're going to stay then there's a pot of potatoes waiting to be mashed with your name on it."

"Yes Ma'am," he salutes, sharing a look with John over her shoulder that she pretends not to see.

For all the chaos and the ridiculous amounts of food she has planned, there's a silver lining in that her Momma is going to bring the turkey for which she is endlessly grateful. She knows that she mainly offered to do it because Ruth Spencer is a benevolent tyrant of her own kitchen, but Marge isn't going to argue with the woman whose Thanksgiving turkeys are legendary in the town. And it takes the weight of it off her own shoulders – there will be more than enough

time for Marge to perfect her own turkey, but she's glad it's not at this moment in time.

"Are you sure we aren't feeding the Hundredth tomorrow with all of this? There's still time to get Croz and Rosie on the phone."

It might have been nice to have all of their army buddies come to stay, though they'd probably fill all of the spare rooms in town and then some. But the first holiday after the war doesn't seem like the right time, when everyone will be celebrating with their own families for the first time in years.

As it is the only people coming are from her family, since John never mentioned anything about inviting his own and Gale's mother moved down to Texas with his sister just after Gale enlisted.

She's already unsure of how exactly she's going to for everyone in the house as it is, without trying to wrangle an entire squadron. Her family means five siblings and all of the various in-laws, nieces, and nephews that come along with them on top of her parents and the three of them. At least it wouldn't be the first time they'd struggled to fit everyone around a table, though Marge's dining table is even smaller than the one they grew up around.

"The Hundredth at their best wouldn't eat as much as my family and you know it, Gale."

John laughs as he kneads dough for the bread rolls, stretching it with the heel of his hand just like she taught him. "What am I getting myself in for here?"

It'll be the first time John has met any of her family outside of her parents. She wonders if he really is nervous about it or if he's looking forward to having a whole new audience for his stories. He spends less time wearing masks of the person he thinks people want him to be these days, but sometimes it's still hard to tell with him.

"Maybe it's best that you don't know." Gale's voice is low and solemn, but the quirk of his lips gives him away. "Sometimes going in blind is the best thing to do."

She opens her mouth to tell him off but she thinks better of it when she remembers the first Thanksgiving he came to when they'd just started officially courting, where there were as many kids as adults and there was just as much food on the table cloth as there were in people's bellies by the end of the meal.

“You'll be fine, John,” she says instead, ignoring the way Gale turns away to smile and shake his head. “They'll love you.”

“Just don't talk about baseball, whatever you do,” Gale adds, and Marge feels her face drain of color.

“John Egan, if you've ever valued your life do *not* mention baseball,” she points her wooden spoon at him like she's brandishing a weapon. “In fact, just don't mention sports at all.”

John holds up flour covered hands in surrender, though there's a glint in his eyes that she doesn't like the look of.

“Alright, no sports, I got it. No wonder they all love Buck so much.”

Then it's her turn to share a look with Gale and she rolls her eyes at him. Neither of them bother to correct John's assumption – if he decides to ignore them then he'll find out for himself the hard way.

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John takes to her family like a duck takes to water. He holds court in the kitchen as everyone comes in, introducing himself and playing bartender. He shakes hands and kisses cheeks and it’s like he’s known her family all his life. Marge isn’t sure how much of it is his natural extroversion and how much of it is the mask or some kind of need to be accepted, but she supposes in the end it all has the same outcome.

Her Momma takes up her post in the kitchen with Marge, the two of them making steady work sending out dishes to the table that are ready and making the finishing touches to the others while Marge occasionally calls John in to help her out with things like opening tins and pulling things out of the oven when both of them are busy.

“You said he was good in the kitchen, but I don’t think I actually believed you until now,” her Momma says after she watches John slice the pies that have been cooling on the counter. “Lord knows I never managed to teach your Father anything.”

“Well that’s because you always chase him out of the kitchen before he has a chance to do anything wrong,” Marge smiles.

“He’s really been learning my recipes?”

“He’s almost perfected your chicken casserole, Momma.”

The two of them smile while Marge washes her hands and dries them on her apron. Laughter pours in from the lounge where she can hear Gale and John arguing over the story of Gale almost taking half the wages of John's squadron in a card game despite not being a gambler.

"-and I swear, the boys' jaws drop. They've never seen Major Cleven at a cards table let alone going all in on a hand-"

"It was matchsticks John, come on!"

"-so once we left them to it in the pub and we're cycling home, pocket full of bills-"

"Matchsticks, Bucky!"

"-I ask him, where'd you learn that, you countin' cards or something? That's not natural luck, and he says to me 'Well Buck, gotta keep your boys on their toes!'-"

" *You* said that, not me."

Marge smiles and shakes her head at her Momma, a warm feeling growing in her chest and her belly at just how right it is to have everyone here like this, the family she grew up in and the family she made for herself, all together for the first time.

"That boy is full of surprises, isn't he?"

"Momma, you don't know the half of it," she laughs.

Once dinner is served everyone finds their own place, treating the dining table as more of a buffet than a real meal since there's no way anyone could eat properly with the amount of food laid out. The chairs have been lined up around the walls of the dining room instead, drinks and plates resting on any surface within arms reach.

Gale stays with her and one of her sisters in law talking about the horses her and Marge's brother keep on their ranch up near Casper Mountain. John disappears into the lounge with her eldest brother and her Pa, and she knows the topic of baseball has come up when everyone else suddenly reappears at the table to refill their plates.

It's the last any of them see of them until later on when they reappear with whiskey and unlit cigars that Marge has no idea where they even came from.

“Pa, remember what the doctor said. You’re not supposed to be smoking cigars anymore,” she says, taking his plate from him to add to the stack on the side table.

“Ah Margie, there’s a lot of things I shouldn’t do, but it’s a holiday!” He smiles back, his big hands coming up to cup her shoulders the same way he always has when he was about to ask her to pretend she hadn’t seen him sneaking out to the shed to smoke.

“If Momma finds you, I’ll tell her I told you so!” She says as her brother leads them towards the front door, away from the kitchen where her Momma is holding her own court with the wives.

John flashes her a grin that has his eyes curled into little crescents. “Don’t worry Marge, I’ll keep an eye on the old man. You can trust me.”

It’s late by the time people start to round up kids and coats, balancing plates of leftovers covered in aluminum. She’s pleasantly surprised that there’s actually enough food left for people to take home, she’d still been convinced until people started going back for seconds that she hadn’t made enough. The pies John helped her make went down a treat, and John is still beaming from seeing everyone clustered around them trying to take extra home with them.

It’s a good look on him, and from the way Gale keeps shooting him fond glances while everyone is busy it seems like he agrees with her.

She’s had more than a few glasses of wine by the time the last of the stragglers have been waved off and it’s just the three of them. Not enough to have her unsteady on her feet, but enough that she doesn’t feel the ache in her cheeks from where she’s been smiling so wide all day.

“I think we ought to get you to bed Marge,” Gale pulls her in with an arm around her waist, pressing a sweet kiss to her temple. “You’ve done more than enough. Let me and John clean up before we turn in.”

She opens her mouth to argue that she’s not tired, but a yawn comes out before she has a chance to actually get any of the words out. The wine has her feeling warm all through her body, and the happiness of being surrounded by people she loves has her feeling like she could burst, but her head is a little heavy. And it has been a long day. Another yawn tries to make its way out and she gives in. Perhaps he has a point.

“Hmm, alright. Just make sure everything goes in the refrigerator, and don’t scrape the good plates, and remember to-”

“We’ve got it, don’t worry,” Gale cuts her off, guiding her towards the stairs with John at his back.

“I’ll keep an eye on him Marge, make sure he doesn’t get up to too much trouble.” John winks at her and she feels herself flush a little, which she puts down to the wine.

“My heroes,” she smiles, pulling each of them down to kiss their cheeks before she makes her way upstairs.

She’s asleep before Gale comes to bed, almost as soon as her head hits the pillow after she’s undressed and brushed her teeth. But she stirs awake when he slides under the sheets and wraps himself around her back, warm and lovely and so so wonderful.

“Go back to sleep,” he says softly, pressing a kiss to her shoulder where the strap of her nightdress has slipped down.

“It went well, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was great honey. You and John did a great job, a regular little dream team.”

She *hmm* s happily, pushing back into the solid warmth of Gale’s chest.

“And you, we couldn’t do it without you. You’re our north star, Gale Cleven.”

Gale just breathes out a chuckle.

“Did John have a good time? I hope it wasn’t too much for him, I know doesn’t have a big family at home.”

He kisses her shoulder again and wraps his arm tighter around her waist as he settles down and relaxes into the pillows.

“Having a family around like that does John good, even if he doesn’t know it.”

Marge falls asleep with a smile on her face, the warmth in her chest that has been growing all day not showing any signs of waning yet.

There are no dreams from either of them that night. She wakes up in

the watery early morning light to Gale still wrapped around her, and she adds it to the list of things she's thankful for along with Gale and John coming home to her safe and sound.

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John doesn't mention anything about plans to go home for Christmas, and just like at Thanksgiving Marge doesn't ask any questions. She does ask Gale if he knows anything, whether John might have mentioned anything to him. Gale tells her, gently but firmly, to leave it alone.

The day John comes back from work and finds her writing Christmas cards at the table he disappears upstairs then reemerges, freshly showered, with two envelopes to add to the pile. She recognises both of his sisters' names, which means there isn't one for his mother. The familiar ache in her chest that she gets when John lets her see his rough edges presses against the backside of her ribs, but she just smiles steadily at him as he goes to the sink to fill a glass with water. He never mentions it, she doesn't ask. But she files away the grateful smile he gives her in return as he sits down and starts licking stamps to paste onto the stack of envelopes.

The two of them spend the afternoons decorating the house together. Marge will be the first to admit that she goes overboard with it a little – every time she comes home from a trip into town for groceries she's found more decorations to hang up, whether it's cheap colorful tinsel from the general store or fresh wreaths to hang on the doors from the flower cart that smell of fresh pine and cloves. John starts bringing her things after Gale comments on the house looking like Santa's grotto, slipping them across the table to her like it's some kind of contraband.

It's the first Christmas after the war, and Marge is of the opinion that it's more than enough reason to push the boat out a little. It's their first Christmas as a married couple, and their first with John too. If that's not an excuse to celebrate a little then what's the point of it all?

Gale's birthday is two days after Christmas, and it will be his first that he's celebrated away from home. She wants this to be special too, to make up for all the times his father all but gambled away their presents from under the tree. She wants Gale to wake up with a smile on his face, not worrying about whether his father has already made a start on the whiskey or if he's going to have to defend his mother and sister from his anger.

Marge wants to make it special for John too, to give him something to make up for the family he doesn't want to visit. Something that will tell him that things have been so much better since he turned up on their doorstep and finally let himself stay.

The house smells of gingerbread and spiced wine the closer they get to the 25th and she loves coming downstairs every morning to start breakfast and seeing all the things that her, John, and Gale have made together. There's strings of popcorn woven into the garland on top of the fireplace that she showed them how to make, and three lopsided little salt dough ornaments hanging on the tree - a G, an M, and a J.

It feels more like a home than it ever has, covered in greens and golds and deep reds. John even bought home some little boughs of mistletoe as a joke that she made him hang in the kitchen doorway. It keeps catching Gale out, when he stumbles downstairs still half-asleep. John doesn't shy away from kissing him in front of her anymore, making a show of holding Gale's face still while he plants a loud kiss on his lips every time they're caught under it.

It always makes her laugh, Gale's sleep-mussed face blinking owlishly up at him and John's cheeky grin when she smacks at them both with the newspaper and tells them both to eat breakfast before it gets cold.

— — —

Her Pa throws his back out just over two weeks before Christmas when he ignores both her and her Momma's pleading to buy a Christmas tree from the sellers in town this year instead of cutting one down himself. He only just managed to drag it into the lounge before he had to give up and Marge's Momma calls her to tell her what he's done.

Gale offers to go over at the weekend to help out, since he's working so much at the moment. He's angling for a promotion in the new year and they have him working all the hours God sends to manage the festive rush – he barely gets home in time to eat dinner and sit with her and John for a while before it's time for bed. Her Momma is placated by that and rings off with Marge's well wishes for her pa and a warning for Gale and John to listen to good sense when Margie speaks it.

"Why don't you let me take this one, Major? You're working hard enough for two men already, I can lug a tree around," John says to Gale when Marge tells him about the call in the morning. "Besides,

you know I've always been stronger between the two of us."

Gale just rolls his eyes over the rim of his coffee mug. "Sure thing Bucky, that's why it was always *you* on the stump grinder, not me."

"Woah now, I had baseball to play in those days! Very busy schedule, it was hard to fit anything else in."

The two of them share a look that Marge can't quite read, somehow both somber and teasing at the same time. Gale is the one to break it first, nodding once with the small smile he only ever seems to use for John.

"See it done, Major."

And that's that.

John pulls up in front of the house once he's finished work in the afternoon and Marge goes out to the truck wrapped up in her warmest coat and scarf against the frost that hasn't quite been chased away by the sun. The heat is already on in the cab when she gets in, John's eyes looking a little tight in the corners in the way she's noticed they do every time the weather is nasty, the same way Gale's do too. But the smile he gives her reaches most of the way to his eyes and doesn't look forced so she lets it go. An afternoon of being fussed over by her Momma will get it the rest of the way there, she's sure.

They spend the whole afternoon there, the sky long since turning a deep blue and into inky black by the time John is almost done. Her Momma has had him up on ladders rehanging the curtains she's spent the last week washing, putting the tree up in the corner of the lounge, and lugging boxes of the good dinnerware from up in the attic. She and Marge have been decorating the tree while he works, and John holds the little step-ladder steady for Marge to put the angel on top the same way he did at home.

He's been sweet-talking her Momma just as much as he's been working – cracking jokes and grinning with his tongue between his teeth the same way he always does – but there's still the tightness around his eyes and his smile that hasn't quite gone away. The mask is in place but she still sees under the edges of it.

She goes upstairs to sit with her Pa for a few minutes before they leave while her Momma packs up the dish of corned beef hash she's made for them to take home, ready to put in the oven so they don't have to cook dinner.

When she comes back down the stairs she can hear the two of them talking in the kitchen. It makes her smile to herself, she's so glad her Momma has taken to John as easily – it's not exactly the most normal thing for a newly married couple to have a permanent lodger, even with everything that happened to them both overseas. But her Momma has always been a bleeding heart, all too happy to take in waifs and strays like they were her own.

"Gale has such a lovely friend in you, John," she overhears, and she can already see the expression on her Momma's face in her mind. "It's so nice that you can help each other adjust to being home after such an awful few years. You're lucky to have each other."

John's voice is unusually soft when he replies, too quiet for her to make out what he actually says beyond the low rumbling cadence of it.

Her Momma sees them out, pulling John into a big bear hug before she kisses both of his cheeks. She has to pull him down to be able to reach, he's at least a foot taller than her on a bad day, and it makes Marge smile to see all six-foot-something of him looking like a little boy as he lets her do it.

He's just as quiet on the way home as he was on the way there. For a while Marge lets him be, sitting with the dish of hash in her lap and watching the houses go by with their glowing windows and the strings of twinkling lights outside.

"I don't think it's going to be long before Momma starts trying to marry you off to one of the cousins," she says eventually, once it's clear he isn't going to be the one making conversation any time soon. There's only so much brooding she can let him do.

John just huffs out a laugh, though it doesn't sound as easy as it should.

"Nah, she's got more sense than that."

"Oh John, she's practically adopted you already. All that's left is to find a way for her to make it official."

Marge smiles at him but he doesn't look at her, and he doesn't return it. Instead he keeps his eyes forward, chewing on his lips like he's craving a smoke or trying to hold something inside. Knowing John it's probably both, and she sighs gently.

“She’s thought of Gale as hers for as long as I can remember, before we ever started dating. Did you know that?” John still doesn’t react beyond a twitch around his eye. “He used to sleep on my brother’s floor some nights when his daddy was on the warpath. It was hard for his Mom, in a house like that, so he used to come to us. Momma used to be the one who cleaned his scraped knees and kissed them better, and she was the one who used to make him cake for his birthday.”

Marge takes a deep breath, weighing her words on her tongue before she says them. “Sometimes your family isn’t who you were born to, it’s the people who love you.”

He keeps worrying at his lips, dragging his teeth over them hard enough for her to see the way they go bloodless for a moment in their wake. She wonders if the last part was too much, prodding him a little too far when he’s already drawn thin. Then he lets out a deep breath and tenses his shoulders around his ears and Marge waits for the outcome.

“The first time my mom threw me out was when I was 16,” he grits out, knuckles just as bloodless where his hand is clenched around the wheel, “said there was something bad in me, something rotten that could never be fixed.”

“John-”

“Lived with my uncle for a while until she let me back, but she never trusted me, and it never lasted long. I thought maybe things would be different after I got back from Europe – some time apart, time for both of us to change, you know? But she took one look at me and shut the door in my face. And that was that.”

“I thought you said you stayed with her for a while?” She asks in a small voice, not sure what else to say in the moment but knowing that silence would be worse than anything else.

John lets out another humorless laugh, more like the bark of a wounded animal, as he finally takes his eyes off the road to look at her. There’s no warmth in his eyes, only resignation and tiredness. Suddenly it’s not difficult for her to imagine what he must have looked like in Germany. She almost wishes he hadn’t looked at her at all, then she wouldn’t have a pit in her stomach or an understanding of just how far Gale must have gone to keep him alive.

“Yeah well, it’s not exactly the type of thing you talk about at a wedding, is it? What a great best man speech – ‘congratulations to the

happy couple, the woman who brought me into this world wishes she hadn't bothered'."

Marge reaches across the truck to squeeze John's arm tighter than is probably comfortable. John breathes in sharply, but she doesn't think it's because of her nails digging into his jacket.

"If your mother had a problem with loving you John then that's something that's wrong with her, not you. You're an easy man to love."

"You really think that? You'd be the first."

Marge smiles softly and relaxes the urgent grip on his arm slightly, but she doesn't let go. "I think maybe Gale would have something to say about that, he definitely loved you first."

She watches him suck at his teeth and sees the smile he's trying to bite back. It's small and weak, but it's genuine, and she feels the pit in her stomach ease up slightly.

"You just wait until Momma is inviting you to the family reunion and parading you around like it's an auction. Then you'll see."

That does get a laugh out of him, and suddenly the tension falls from his shoulders like it's being swept away by a cool breeze on a summer's day.

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They spend Christmas at Marge's parents' with the rest of the family, and it's just like a re-do of Thanksgiving only with enough space around the table for people to eat dinner. John lets the kids climb all over him while Gale helps them put together their toys and Marge helps her Momma in the kitchen. Her Pa is doing better but his back is still painful so he asks Gale to carve the turkey when it comes time for everyone to eat, and Gale defers to John since he knows her Momma still doesn't trust him with knives in the kitchen.

You'd think learning to fly a plane would trump the time he almost sliced the tip of his thumb off when he was seven and didn't know how to handle a chopping knife, but her Momma has never let him forget it. He still laughs good-naturedly when she brings it up, just like she does every Christmas and lets her pinch his cheek afterwards.

Gale's Mom stayed down in Texas again. Gale is just as pragmatic

about it as he was for Thanksgiving – it's warm down there, it's a long way to travel, they saw her at the wedding. John has only met her once, before the wedding. She left not long after they took pictures. It's not a relationship she can say she'll ever understand, but she supposes it can't have been easy living under a roof with James Cleven.

They all come home after dinner has settled and the kids start getting sleepy. It's still pretty early, the sky only having just gone dark when they leave. She heats up some mulled wine while Gale and John make a fire, the three of them sitting around the hearth picking at a plate of cheese and crackers and cajoling Gale until he agrees to drink it with them. John sits with his back against the couch and his legs stretched out over the rug. Gale sits in a similar position against the coffee table, his legs at a right angle to John's with his socked feet resting against John's ankles where his trousers have pulled up. Marge sits with her legs folded under her between the two of them, resting against Gale's side and feeling like she never wants to be anywhere else.

It's quiet, a blessed relief after a day spent in a house full to bursting, and the three of them sip at the wine while one of the records John bought for the house plays softly in the background. Marge bought John a new sweater from the both of them since he didn't bring much with him in the way of clothing. Gale and John didn't buy each other any gifts, both of them muttering something about getting each other all they needed in the camp that Marge doesn't understand and doesn't ask for more details.

John did buy her a gift though, on top of the things he bought "for the house" instead of to Gale himself, and he gives it to her once they've finished the first jug of wine. He hands her a little velvet jewelry box and she opens it with a small gasp. It's a beautiful necklace, a thin gold chain with a teardrop pendant that holds a stone the color of the sky on a summer evening.

"It's beautiful John," she breathes, tracing the chain with her fingertips, "but it's too much, I can't take this."

John just grins and shakes his head, looking between her and Gale before he shrugs, "hey, what's the point in having money if i can't spend it on things that make me happy? Why don't you put it on, see how you like it."

Marge goes to hand Gale the box to do it for her, but he tips his chin

towards John, his hand covering hers.

“Why don’t you let Bucky do the honors, huh?”

She catches John’s eye and watches him knock back the last of his wine before he shuffles forward and holds his own hand out to take the box. Marge pushes up onto her knees and turns around, gathering up her hair and waiting for John to put it on.

The skin on the back of her neck feels sensitive, vulnerable as she bares it for him. She can feel his breath against it as he leans in, and the warmth of his fingers brushing her skin as he does the clasp. Gale watches the two of them, his eyes going between the pendant and John behind her. Her breathing turns shallow, holding still as if any sudden movement will break the moment stretched taut between the three of them.

“There,” he whispers, his hand ghosting the curve of her shoulder and holding it there for a moment before he moves away.

Marge touches the pendant where it rests just below her clavicle, nestled in the neckline of her dress. Gale watches her still, his eyes almost the same color as the stone.

“What d’you think, Buck? I do good?” John asks.

“I think it’s perfect, John.”

There’s a slight intake of breath from behind her and Marge’s throat is suddenly dry. She reaches out for her glass and drains what’s left in it before she pushes herself up to her feet.

“Why don’t I get us the last of that wine, huh?” She says without waiting for an answer from either of them.

There’s something growing in her chest and her gut, something that makes her fingers shake when she pours the wine into a saucepan to warm up. It’s overwhelming, heady and dizzying, the way it’s pushing her closer to something even though she doesn’t know exactly what that something is. It’s all she can do to take a few minutes away to clear her head.

But John follows her.

“There anything I can help with?” He asks, coming to lean his hip against the counter beside her. His voice is low, a thread of

amusement in it like he knows she's affected. Or maybe he always sounds like this and Marge is just reading into things, she doesn't know anymore.

She just smiles at him and turns off the stove, pouring the wine out into the empty jug.

"Here, you can take the jug, I'll bring that tin of gingerbread from Harry and Jean."

John goes ahead of her and Marge follows him, sliding her thumb under the seal of the tin to break it. Only John stops in the doorway to right his grip on the jug and she doesn't notice until she walks into the back of him and he puts a hand on her hip to steady her.

She looks at him to smile in thanks, then keeps looking further up to where the bough of mistletoe is hanging above them, right where she told him to put it. Such a cliché. He follows her gaze up until he sees it too, then drops his eyes back to hers.

"Well John, aren't you going to kiss me?" She asks him with a calmness that she doesn't quite feel.

His palm is big and warm where it cups her jaw as he leans down to kiss her. She closes her eyes and presses up into him, the tin of gingerbread caught between them as her other hand curls into his sweater to keep him close so she can kiss him harder.

John follows her lead, tilting his head so he can deepen it. He sucks at her bottom lip as he does, a gentle pressure that makes her stomach tighten.

Then, all of a sudden, he's gone and Marge blinks her eyes open, dropped back to reality when she didn't even feel her feet leave the ground.

Gale is standing next to them, yet another thing she didn't notice, the jug of wine in his hand where he must have taken it from John.

"Don't stop on my account," he says, voice low and rumbling in his chest like thunder. He places the jug on the sideboard carefully without moving away.

John's hand is still on her face but he's watching Gale, something passing between them in that secret language they have that Marge isn't privy to.

“Kiss her, Major. That’s an order.”

John turns back to her, and she can feel the shape of his lips as he breathes out a “ *Sir, yes sir* ” before he’s kissing her again, his free hand wrapping around her waist and pressing against her lower back. This kiss is different, so much more than the first – like the difference between a wave and a tempest. John kisses her hard enough to bend her backwards, and when she feels Gale’s hands take the tin from her she wraps them around John’s neck to keep him close.

She opens her mouth when John’s tongue touches the seam of her lips, both of them letting out breathy little noises as he kisses her deeper, tracing the edges of her teeth. The heat in her belly from earlier swells like a fire, arousal running through her blood just from John’s kiss and the steady presence of Gale beside them watching it all.

Watching his best friend kiss his wife.

It’s a heady thought, and she keens high in her throat when she feels Gale press in close behind her, bracketing her between the two of them right there in the doorway. She can feel Gale’s chest solid between her and John’s hand on her back, another hand joining it on her waist that has to be Gale’s.

“What do you think about taking this to the bedroom?” Gale rumbles against her back, his thumb stroking in maddeningly steady circles on her hip.

She means to pull back so she can speak but then John sucks on her tongue in a way that makes her knees weak, sagging back into Gale when he finally breaks the kiss. All she can do is nod, not quite able to find the thread of whatever she was going to say.

“Lead the way,” John says over her head before he bends to sweep Marge’s legs over his arm in a bridal carry.

Her core throbs with the easy display of strength as she wraps her arms around his neck. There’s something so heady about John like this, the confidence he suddenly exudes now that they’re doing something he’s an expert in. He has far more experience in this than she and Gale have put together, and she’s sure that in his letters and stories Gale has only scratched the surface of what John was getting up to behind dance halls and pubs in England. That alone has her thighs clenching in anticipation as he carries her up the stairs, Gale close behind him.

She bounces on the bed when John drops her, then he immediately pulls his sweater over his head and throws it aside without any notice or care for where it might land. Gale closes the door behind him and turns on the bedside lamp before he sits down on the bed next to her. She feels his hand curve around the back of her neck, his thumb stroking sweetly over her skin and the chain of John's necklace in a way that sends another pulse of heat through her nerves then down between her legs.

"You gonna undress me like a gentleman, John?" She breathes out, tilting her head so her hair tumbles down over one shoulder.

"Yes ma'am," he smirks in return.

He kneels at the foot of the bed and cups the back of one ankle while he pulls her shoe off, then does the same to the other foot. Once he's done he keeps her feet in his lap as he runs his hands up one leg, touch-teasing and light until he finds the clips of her stocking. His fingers are deft and practiced – he flicks each one open one-handed while his other hand splays huge and warm over the inside of her thigh, keeping her in place. She can feel the tips of his fingers so close to where she's burning up, close enough to make her gasp and John smirk up at her as he ever so slowly pulls down her stocking. The loss of his hands on her makes her want to whine but it's only a moment before he does the same to the other leg, his fingertips straying even closer to where she wants them.

He stands once he's pulled off her second stocking and plants his knee on the bed between her thighs, holding himself over her as they watch each other. Marge can feel his breath steady on her face as she struggles to keep her own chest from heaving. It's almost ridiculous to be this worked up over a kiss – he's barely even touched her properly yet and she's already wet and ready for him – but it feels like this has been building since he first showed up at the house. Every smirk and grin, every dance in the kitchen, every moment of vulnerability. All of it leading them here to this moment, the three of them all together.

She feels John's hand on her waist, moving around until he finds the tie for her dress without breaking eye contact.

"Unwrappin' you like the sweetest Christmas present I've ever seen," he says, low and quiet.

He pulls at the fabric until the knot comes undone, slowly peeling back the first side of her dress. The air isn't cold in the bedroom but it

still makes her shiver as it hits her overheated skin. John's hand is hotter still on her hip as he finds the second tie.

"Such a lucky boy, ain't that right Buck?"

The second half of her dress comes undone and he pulls it away from her just as slowly as the first. She lies there breathing hard through her mouth, her dress pooled around her sides and exposed to John's raking gaze when he finally looks away to take her in. The stone of her necklace sits in the hollow of her throat, moving with her as she breathes. Her skin almost tingles under John's eyes, the weight of it so great it's almost a physical touch. She swallows around a dry mouth, waiting for whatever John is going to do next.

"As long as you treat her right, Bucky," Gale says, voice honey rich. "You gonna show her a good time?"

"You don't even gotta ask. I'm gonna make you feel so good, Marge."

He finally leans down to kiss her again and it breaks the spell that kept her still under his hands. She arches up into him, pressing her breasts against his chest and fisting a hand in his hair to pull him closer still. He's still wearing far too much clothing – something about the contrast between him undressing her and not himself leaves her feeling almost vulnerable but it does nothing to bank the heat in her belly. If anything it only makes it burn even hotter.

When he breaks the kiss to breath Marge watches Gale fist his hand in John's shirt to pull him up for his own kiss and she moans at the sight of them together after imagining it so many times. Gale is so beautiful, long eyelashes sweeping over his skin as he kisses John with a force that he's never used with her. It makes her wonder if it's like this between them every time or if the idea of watching two people he loves together gets Gale as hot as it does her. She wants to know more than ever how they touch and kiss and love each other, but not enough for her to give up her own pleasure.

"Don't keep her waiting John," Gale murmurs against his lips like he can read her mind, then pushes John backwards until he's sinking down to his knees again, "Back to work."

John flashes her a wink and it's all the warning she gets before he's hooking his hands behind her knees and pulling her down the bed towards him. She lifts her hips for him to pull her underwear down and off, then lets him shoulder his way between her thighs.

His hands are gentle as he pushes her legs further apart, but his mouth when he finally puts it on her is unforgiving. He doesn't ease her into it – his tongue laps at the core of her hard and fast, enough to steal her breath. She reaches out blindly for Gale, holding onto his wrist just for something to anchor her against the force of it.

It's so incredible already, and if she didn't already know the kinds of things he was getting up to in England this alone would be enough to convince her of his experience.

"His mouth," she gasps out between breaths, turning so she can see where Gale has his eyes fixed on John's head buried between her legs. "It's so good Gale, have you had his mouth yet?"

Gale swallows, his lips pink and shining in the low light of the lamp. His eyes don't stray from John, and Marge reaches down to thread her fingers through John's curls.

"Yeah, darlin'. I know he's good."

His voice is like sandpaper, and John moans into her when he hears it. He mouths at her clit even harder, doubling down, and she wonders if it's praise that gets him worked up or if he just likes hearing Gale talk about him, or maybe it's both. She can feel his fingers circling her entrance gently, gathering up the slick of her arousal and from his mouth before he slips two of them inside without any resistance.

She keens and pulls at John's hair, arching her back and her hips into him for more. "Feels so nice John, so good. I'm close already," she pants. His fingers are so thick inside her, thicker than Gale's are. The stretch as he adds a third feels so good, so sweet, and she can't help but clench around him when she thinks about how much better the stretch of his cock would feel.

When she feels the crest of the wave approaching she tries to pull him away, wanting it to last a bit longer but John strains against her grip in his hair to keep going, pressing her tongue harder into her clit and fucking her on his fingers until she's clamping down around him. It hits her so hard that she sees stars, her hips rolling with each wave that follows, breathing hard as John fucks her through it.

"God, oh god," she whines, "so *good* , John."

He doesn't stop until she cries out, oversensitive and overwrought. He gives her a few moments to collect herself before he slips his fingers out gently, rubbing her thigh when she whines low in her throat at the

sensation. As soon as he sits back on his heels Gale stands up and rounds the bed to pull him upright so he can kiss the taste of her from his mouth.

It's an even better view than the first time – she gets to see the way Gale has to tilt his head back and John's big hand on Gale's jaw holding him close. She can't stop herself from reaching between her legs to ghost her fingers over herself, twitching a little from sensitivity but feeling so good watching John melt under Gale's touch even as he sucks on Gale's tongue.

Gale unbuttons John's shirt and pushes it off his shoulders to the floor then immediately goes for his belt. Marge clenches her thighs around her hand at just how broad John is, hidden under that deceptively tall frame. The hair on his chest and his belly is dark and she burns to run her fingers through it.

"Get on the bed Bucky," Gale practically growls into his mouth, pushing John until he climbs onto the bed next to Marge.

He curls himself around her, his body almost dwarfing hers as he slides his bicep under her head and reaches between her legs to cover her hand with his where he guides her fingers to her entrance and pushes two of them inside herself. Her fingers are so much smaller than his and suddenly it doesn't feel enough. She wants something more.

"Got her all ready for you, Buck. Just gotta slide right on in, easy as that."

John fucks her with her fingers while they watch Gale pull his shirt over his head without bothering to unbutton it, and she can hear to way his breathing goes shallow as Gale undoes his belt. He leans in to kiss her then, pulling her attention away from Gale as he pushes his tongue into her mouth so she can taste herself, salty sweet and maddening as he continues the slow drag of her fingers inside herself.

It feels like a minute and an entire lifetime until Gale is pulling both of their hands away, then settles himself between her legs until they're wrapped around his waist. She tries to pull away from John to watch him but John holds her jaw still and sucks on her bottom lip until it feels bruised. She drags her nails over his chest in retaliation, swallowing down the moan it earns her like it's a prize from the fair.

Gale guides himself into her in one smooth stroke, slow but insistent until his hips are fully seated against hers and it's John's turn to

swallow her moan. Her nails dig into his skin at Gale's first thrust and she lets her head fall back against his arm.

"Never thought I'd get so lucky," Gale grits out as he finds his pace, "like all my Christmases have come at once."

"You're amazing, Marge," John says with his lips against her throat. His hand drops low on her stomach then pushes down gently on it like he's trying to feel Gale move inside her. She lets out a high breathy keen as everything suddenly feels so much *more* . "Ain't never met a woman as good as you."

She catches his wrist but doesn't pull his hand away – just holds on to feel all three of them joined together – then she turns into him to nose at his jaw until he kisses her again. He fucks his mouth with his tongue, keeping pace with Gale. It's all too much, feeling far too good for her to hold on for much longer as she winds tighter and tighter.

"Come on, sweetheart. Show us how good you feel," Gale coaxes.

A few more thrusts from them both and it's enough to tip her over the edge again. John lets her pull away from him to pant out her second climax, clenching like a vice around Gale's cock inside her. He groans, his voice somehow going even lower, and his hips stutter like he's close too.

"Pull out Buck, don't make a mess of her." He pulls his arm out from under Marge's head and reaches out for Gale, a hand on his hip to urge him towards John. "Let me do the honors."

John takes Gale's cock in hand, stripping it tight and fast. Gale holds himself up with a hand on John's shoulder as he curls over himself, breathing hard. Marge can see how his cock shines in the light, slick from her cunt as John works him towards his own completion.

"You want it that bad?" Gale asks, threading his hand into the short hair at the base of John's neck. Marge has never heard him sound like that in all the time she's known him, and even wrung out and oversensitive from two orgasms she can feel the way it makes her core tighten.

"Fuck, *yeah.* You know I do, Buck," John breathes, then moans when Gale's hips jerk and he stripes his chest with come, practically fucking John's fist to his end. "There you go Buck, just like that."

Gale wilts once he's spent, dropping his head to rest against John's in

an echo of the first time Marge ever saw them together. In a strange way it feels like everything has come full circle, like this was somehow inevitable from the outset.

“I’ll go get something to clean up with,” John says, panting slightly, “just give me a minute.”

Marge stops him with a hand on his shoulder before he can move. “What about you, John? You haven’t had your turn yet.”

“I uh, I had mine just now. Got a bit carried away, I guess.” John’s cheeks flush pink but his grin holds no hint of embarrassment.

Marge bites her lip then reaches down to slip a hand into his open trousers, palming over his cock through his boxers and feeling the dampness starting to come through the fabric.

“Christ, John,” Gale groans and kisses him messily before he stands up. “You stay there, I’ll go.”

He hitches up his trousers to sit higher on his hips before he turns to go into the bathroom and Marge sits up so she can replace Gale’s mouth on John’s with her own as she rubs at his softening cock.

“Next time, John,” she promises as she pulls back, “next time you come first.”

“Yes ma’am. There’ll be no argument from me,” he grins.

Gale comes back with a damp cloth and helps them both clean up before he takes care of himself. Everything goes quiet while her and Gale undress properly until Marge catches John hesitating between the door and the bed like he’s not sure which way he should be going.

“Which side do you want?” She asks, smiling when he tries to keep the relief off his face.

“I’m easy,” he just shrugs like there was never any uncertainty and strips down to his skin.

Gale slips under the sheets and settles himself in the middle of the bed, holding the edge up in clear invitation. “Tell me about it.”

John slides in behind him, shuffling until he’s pressed against Gale’s back from head to toe. Marge gets in on the other side, sandwiching Gale between them and tucking herself against his chest.

“Merry Christmas boys,” she says into the dark and closes her eyes.

John’s arm reaches around Gale’s waist and he settles his hand on Marge’s hip, warm and steady over her skin and keeping the three of them together. She smiles against Gale’s skin and lets herself fall asleep sated and warm.

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In the morning Marge wakes up to John's head tucked under Gale's chin and Gale's soft smile as he watches her stretch out the stiffness of sleep from her limbs.

“Morning,” she whispers, not wanting to wake John.

“Don't worry about him, he's always slept like a damn log. Coulda slept in the cockpit in the middle of a dogfight,” Gale smiles, but he still doesn't raise his own voice above a whisper. John just shifts slightly against him, mashing his nose into Gale's chest in a way that frankly looks ridiculous.

In the crisp light of morning Marge feels a sense of rightness settle over her like a blanket, another confirmation that they've somehow arrived at the point they were all heading towards without even knowing it.

“No plans for today,” she says lightly.

Gale smiles at her, spreading molasses sweet and slow over his face. “No plans for today, no,” he echoes. “But I'm sure John will have some ideas when he wakes up.”

Marge feels herself smile and her stomach clench in excitement.

In the end they don't make it out of the bedroom until well after lunch, and only then because Marge draws the line at eating turkey sandwiches in bed.

It's a hell of a good day.

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For Gale's birthday her Momma makes them all a special dinner as if she hadn't just had the whole family over for Christmas a few days ago. But Gale has never been one to argue with her Momma, and John already loves her like she's his own even if he doesn't quite know how

to process it. Marge tries not to think too much about that, or the conversation they had in his truck, or the Christmas card he never sent to Wisconsin.

She knows her Momma is more than happy to make up for any shortcoming of maternal love anyone has ever had in their lives anyway.

When they get there she's still making food and she lets John help out in the kitchen, putting him to work mashing potatoes and seasoning the steaks. Marge and Gale both bite back smiles as she drags him into the kitchen and hands him an apron – she might never trust Gale in her kitchen as long as she lives but John is different, naturally. A combination of natural charm, a desperate need to be useful, and Marge's hard work at getting him trained up in the kitchen at home has obviously gone a long way to getting her Momma to trust someone in her cathedral.

John woke up screaming again in the middle of the night. Somehow Marge had almost forgotten it was a semi-regular occurrence, something that hadn't seemed to plague him quite as often since things with Gale had gotten serious. She'd been woken up first by the pained noises he was making in her ear, then by his arms squeezing around her so tight she thought she'd crack a rib if he didn't let go. It was Gale who woke him up, cradling his face and speaking to him like a spooked horse, low and steady until his eyes opened and lost some of the fevered haze of the dream.

John had tried to apologize, but neither of them let him finish getting the words out. It's not something they ever want him to be sorry for, just like Gale has finally stopped apologizing for his own dreams.

Marge had made sure to dress in the bathroom in the morning where John couldn't see her checking her ribs in the mirror. There were two red bands around her sides that looked like they might bruise later, but John doesn't need to see them. She'll tell Gale about them when it's not his birthday. She knows he'll keep her secret, and more importantly she knows he won't blame John for something out of his control.

John still has a hard time letting her see him at his worst some nights, and misplaced guilt over something so trivial won't help him.

Visiting her parents does him good. She'd have a hard time believing it only happened a few hours ago to see him now, spinning her

Momma to the song on the radio every time he passes her the same way he does to Marge sometimes when he's in a good mood, like they're in a dance hall instead of a kitchen.

His smile is bright, almost reaching his eyes, and he flashes a wink at Gale before he launches into a crooning rendition of Blue Skies. It's close enough to the real thing that Marge doesn't worry about whether or not it's for their benefit. Gale catches her eye while they set the table together after a particularly loud peal of laughter comes from the kitchen and they both smile, thinking the same thing.

It's an easy thing to love John Egan.

Her Pa breaks out the good whiskey for him and John and there's ice cold cokes in the refrigerator for Gale while Marge has a glass of wine with her Momma. The food is good, the mood around the table is even better, and her little family is something so precious that she can almost feel her heart expanding behind her ribs as she takes everything in.

Not for the first time she thanks every lucky star in the sky that she gets to have this, that through war and prison and death and destruction Gale and John made it through the other side. That she gets to love them.

When they get home again her and John take Gale to bed, Marge using his mouth while John fucks him from behind and makes him moan into her.

He spills inside her in the end, pinned between the two of them on the bed. John spills inside of him soon after, and the three of them lie there tangled together while they catch their breath. John is the first to stir eventually – he cleans them both up before he takes care of himself, and a shiver of arousal runs through Marge when she thinks of the mess they made of Gale. Both of them marking him as their own, working together to take him apart the way he deserves.

If things stayed like this forever then she could be happy, she thinks. She can't fix what happened to them during the war, the things she knows about and the things they haven't told her. She can't take the memories and dreams and the lost men that haunt them away.

It's not her job to do that, even if she could, even though she *wants* to. But she can be here with them when they get too much, she can give them space when they need it and keep them company when they need to remember that they're still alive, safe at home with her.

And they can love her, each in their own way, just as much as they love each other. They can trust her to know exactly how much she can and is willing to handle when things get rough, and they can let her in to see the frayed and damaged parts of themselves.

They can all trust that this is enough – that the three of them can build a life together far better than anything they could make alone.

And so they do.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!! if you made it this far I'm so grateful and I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it! :)

Come chill with me on tumblr where I post about hbo war or twit where i'm usually talking shit about kpop!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!